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THE NEW UTILITARIANS ?

Studies in the Origins and Early Intellectual  
Associations of Fabianism

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## SUMMARY

This thesis concerns the intellectual origins and early associations of Fabianism. It concentrates on the period of the 1880's and early 1890's during which time the Fabian Society was founded and its basic doctrines were formed. Its principals are the small group of intellectuals who played the major role in working out its basic theories.

The thesis is arranged as a series of studies of five thinkers or schools of thought with whom the Fabians had important intellectual associations. Each of the five studies seeks both to supplement and supply a revision of the received account of the formative influences and intellectual traditions which shaped the development of Fabian Socialism. The importance of Comte and the English Positivists, Marx, J.S. Mill and the Utilitarians upon the formation of Fabian thought is a matter of existing recognition, whereas the apparently paradoxical influence of Herbert Spencer has been previously neglected, to the detriment of a proper understanding of the early development of Fabianism. A recognition of Spencer's importance requires a reappraisal not a rejection of the generally received view of the Fabians as the 'New Utilitarians.'

Fabian theory emerged out of a process of blending and modifying the traditions of Radicalism, Positivism and Socialism. The emergence of that theory was conditioned by the experience of middle class intellectuals facing new social and economic uncertainties in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. It is as intellectuals who see themselves as practical men that the Fabians most clearly emerge as the 'New Utilitarians'.

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- PP            Passfield Papers, British Library of Political and  
              Economic Science, London School of Economics
- WP            Wallas Papers, British Library of Political and  
              Economic Science, London School of Economics

## INTRODUCTION

Shaw said of the Fabian Society,

It was a silly business. They had one elderly retired workman. They had two psychical researchers: Edward Pease and Frank Podmore, for whom I slept in a haunted house in Clapham. There were anarchists, led by Mrs. Wilson, who would not hear of anything Parliamentary. There were young ladies on the lookout for husbands, who left when they succeeded. There were atheists and Anglo-Catholics. There was Bland's very attractive wife Edith Nesbit, who wrote verses in The Weekly Dispatch for half a guinea a week, and upset all the meetings by making scenes and pretending to faint. She became famous as a writer of fairy tales.<sup>1</sup>

The Fabian Society emerged out of what Hubert Bland called a "long clarifying experience."<sup>2</sup> That this experience would include a diversity of antecedent intellectual sources was to be expected of a predominantly middle-class intellectual group which was both conscious and self-conscious of the role of intellectuals within the political framework of the nineteenth century. For the Fabians the very breadth of diverse influences was a matter for intellectual satisfaction;<sup>3</sup> so that although the Fabian approach frequently tended

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<sup>1</sup>G.B. Shaw, "Early Days," in M. Cole, ed., The Webbs and Their Work (London, 1949), p. 7.

<sup>2</sup>H. Bland, "The Faith I Hold," in Edith Nesbit Bland, ed. Essays, by Hubert Bland (London, 1914), p. 228.

<sup>3</sup>See E.R. Pease, The History of the Fabian Society (London, 1926), chap. 1; Also see Shaw's Appendix I in Pease, The History of the Fabian Society.

to opportunism, the diversity of influence thus becomes a matter at once undeniable and circumspect. In dealing with the Fabians' own explanations of intellectual indebtedness respect and scepticism must always be evenly balanced. The Fabians, and Webb in particular, were no strangers to literary opportunism, and frequently their own acknowledgment of the derivation of their ideas was itself propaganda for those ideas. Despite this, and despite the Society's range of personal idiosyncracies, characteristic features nevertheless make it possible to speak in terms of Fabianism: there was an internal consensus as to the typical characteristics of mutually held principles which were capable of furnishing fruitful ideas, policies and practice; this explicit self-definition which had arisen out of protracted discussion over the course of many years had generated a common loyalty to this broad tendency of collective thought, severally arrived at; there was a conscious recognition of this common commitment as a shared tradition emerging out of, but standing in distinction to, other traditions; there was a means of popular outlet for these ideas which were explicitly promulgated as representative of the shared viewpoint; there was external recognition of the corporate identity.

That 'clarifying experience' of which Bland wrote is the subject of a study whose starting point is the period before the Fabian, to use Shaw's collective singular, came into existence. At this stage the future principals of the Fabian Society were casting coarse nets to catch ideas and solutions to the economic, political and social problems which confronted them. It closes in the mid-1890's, by which time the Fabian Society and its leading ideas had been firmly

established. Its principals are the converts to Socialism of the mid-1880's - Bernard Shaw, Sidney Webb, Sydney Olivier, Annie Besant, and William Clarke - together with Beatrice Potter Webb. Webb, Shaw, Wallas and Olivier in particular dominated the Society during its formative years, setting the pattern of Fabian activity and playing a leading role in the formulation of policy and practice. While Beatrice Webb did not join the Society until after her marriage in 1892, her intellectual background had curiously paralleled that of her future colleagues. After joining the Society in 1893 Beatrice Webb's influence had an important bearing upon the Society's practice and methods of social investigation.

The study of the Fabian 'clarifying experience' involves a consideration of some major contributions to the climate of intellectual opinion in the nineteenth century, and their importance to the development of Fabian thought. The impact of Comte, the English Positivists, Marx, J.S. Mill and the Utilitarians upon the Fabians is a matter of existing recognition, whereas the apparently paradoxical influence of Herbert Spencer has been neglected, to the detriment of a proper understanding of the early development of Fabian thought. Previous accounts have relied upon the obvious antagonism of Spencer's individualism to deny his impact, despite the fact that the Socialists' general acknowledgment of the influence of Spencer's ideas makes him a figure of unusual interest. A recognition of Spencer's importance requires a reappraisal, not a rejection of the generally received view of the Fabians as the 'New Utilitarians' although some errors and confusions of earlier accounts need to be dispelled before a clarification of the precise intellectual identity of the 'New Utilitarians' is possible.



With the important reservation that their boundaries were not discrete, the five studies are, perversely, broadly chronological in the following sense. The first, and enduring, enthusiasm was for science, and in this regard the influence of Spencer was pronounced. Sidney Webb was known to have extensively read Spencer by at least as early as 1880, and the earliest record of his lectures to the Zetetical Society, of which he and Shaw were active members, (Shaw also frequented the Halls of Science, where Spencer's theories were popular, in the late 1870's), evince an admiration for evolutionary science, particularly as propounded by Herbert Spencer. Both Annie Besant, through contact in the National Secular Society, and Beatrice Webb, through personal contact, were familiar with Spencer's views by at least the mid-1870's; and Graham Wallas' interest in evolutionary science (largely Darwinian) dates from about the same period. Olivier, whose interests were mainly ethical, had read Spencer, along with Comte and Mill, at Oxford before 1881; and when he later joined the Georgeite Land Reform Union his views on the land question were clearly influenced by his prior attachment to the views of Spencer and Mill on the subject. Arising out of, and complimentary to, this interest in science, Webb, Wallas and Olivier formed a reading circle in 1882 specifically to study the doctrines of Auguste Comte. Annie Besant's positivism was inextricably linked with her secularist activities of the mid-1870's; whilst Beatrice Webb clearly dates her own study of Comte from her contact with Frederic Harrison in 1879. Although Comte's views were approved of (with the exception of Shaw), the evolutionary framework was largely Spencerian. It was Comte's value as a secular religionist and his method of social reconstruction which were explored as a 'hopeful solution' and which

were subsequently superceded by an explicit commitment to Socialism. Whilst still influenced by Comte, Olivier, Wallas, Clarke and Webb were joined by Shaw at the Hampstead Historic Club's Marxism reading circle in 1885. Independently, Beatrice Webb studied Marx in 1886/7 and produced an unpublished paper on the subject. Annie Besant, whilst not herself a member of the Hampstead Historic Club, was aware of the Marx-Jevons value controversy which had been debated at the Club. Although these leading members of the Society had long been familiar with J.S. Mill, having long entertained a high regard for him, (which had been important in bringing them to rationalism and free thought) Mill's real importance for the Fabians was subsequent to their conversion to Socialism, during the period of their initial involvement in metropolitan politics and their campaign to win the Radical Clubs for Socialism. Finally, the importance of the Fabian Utilitarian association can only be assessed in the light of these other intellectual traditions upon which the Fabians had drawn.



## SOCIALISM AND HERBERT SPENCER

It is widely recognised that Herbert Spencer was perhaps the last philosopher whose ideas enjoyed a wide popular coinage. For some two or three decades at the end of the nineteenth century, Herbert Spencer stood as an imposing intellect whose works were widely read and greatly admired. He was enormously influential, and enjoyed the high regard not only of the leading men of science of his day,<sup>1</sup> but if Beatrice Webb is to be believed, that of the permanent men on the docks also.<sup>2</sup> Henry Holt, an American editor wrote:

Probably no other philosopher ever had such a vogue as Spencer had from about 1870 to 1890. Most preceding philosophers had presumably been mainly restricted to readers habitually given to the study of philosophy, but not only was Spencer considerably read and generally talked about by the whole intelligent world, in England and America, but that world was wider than any that preceded it.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>For instance, Darwin said Spencer was "about a dozen times my superior." Letter to Joseph Hooker, Dec. 10, 1886, Life and Letters of Charles Darwin, ed., Francis Darwin, (N.Y., 1959) Vol. 2, p.239. "I suspect that hereafter he will be looked at as by far the greatest living philosopher in England; perhaps equal to any that have lived." Letter to E. Ray Lankester, March 15, 1870, Ibid., Vol. 2, p.301. Alfred Russell Wallace considered Spencer "the greatest all-round thinker and most illuminating reasoner of the nineteenth century." A.R. Wallace to R. Meldola, June 23, 1910. R. Meldola, Evolution: Darwinian and Spencerian, The Herbert Spencer Lecture, 1910, (Oxford, 1910).

<sup>2</sup>B. Webb, My Apprenticeship, (London, 1971), p.303.

<sup>3</sup>H. Holt, Garrulties of an Octegenarian Editor, (Boston, 1923), p. 298.

His works were translated into Oriental as well as European languages, and he "achieved the final distinction of a nineteenth century liberal" when a student in St. Petersburg was arrested for possessing a copy of Social Statics.<sup>1</sup>

Social Statics had, despite its title, indicated an approach to social science already rooted in an evolutionary view of nature and society. Spencer had inherited his father's strong scientific interests, and first discovered the theory of evolution for himself through reading Lyell and Lamarck.<sup>2</sup> Applying Lamarck's theory of development in various fields, Spencer refined and developed his ideas about evolution in a series of essays under such titles as "The Development Hypothesis," "A Theory of Population," and "Progress: It's Law and Cause." During this period Spencer discovered Von Baer's law that the development of organisms involved a change from homogeneity to heterogeneity. This law of embryology gave Spencer that crucial formula which he subsequently elaborated into a universal law applicable to all physical, biological and social phenomena. The Synthetic Philosophy, Spencer's major undertaking, was an attempt to integrate all knowledge under the general principles of evolution.

As the Social Democratic Federation suggested in the columns

<sup>1</sup>J.W. Burrow, "Herbert Spencer, The Philosopher of Evolution," History Today, Vol., III, No. 10, Oct., 1958, p.676.

<sup>2</sup>At the age of twenty Spencer read Sir Charles Lyell's Principles of Geology. Lyell propounded Lamarckian ideas in order to refute them; Spencer, however, was otherwise persuaded, and inclined to generally accept Lamarck's theories. "It's congruity with the course of procedure throughout things at large gave it an irresistible attraction," (Spencer wrote), "and my belief in it never afterwards wavered, much as I was, in after years, ridiculed for entertaining it." H. Spencer, Autobiography (N.Y., 1904), Vol. I, p. 201. See also D. Duncan, Life and Letters of Herbert Spencer (N.Y., 1906), Vol. II, p. 156 ff.

of Justice:

In six days the Lord made the earth,  
And on the seventh,  
Herbert Spencer<sup>1</sup>  
wrote it down.

This general, universal principle, characterized by Spencer as "The instability of the Homogenous," which governed the operation of all phenomena, was, in the words of the original definition:

Evolution is an integration of matter and concomitant dissipation of motion; during which the matter passes from an indefinite, incoherent homogeneity to a definite, coherent heterogeneity; and during which the retained motion undergoes a parallel transformation.<sup>2</sup>

This law is perhaps the better remembered in its more succinct contemporary American form; Will James rendered it:

Evolution is a change from the nohowish untalkaboutable all alikeness, to a somehowish and in general talkaboutable not-allalikeness, by continuous stick-togetherations and somethingelseifications.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Justice Spet. 20, 1884.

<sup>2</sup> H. Spencer, First Principles (London, 1898), p. 396.

<sup>3</sup> R.B. Perry, The Thought and Character of William James (Boston, 1935), Vol. I, pp. 482-483. The parody, which has been credited to James, was first rendered by the English mathematician Thomas Kirkman in his Philosophy Without Assumptions (London, 1876), p. 292.

For Spencer, societies, like all other organisms, were subject to this general universal law; and changed from a simple, homogeneous, centrally controlled state (the militant type of society), to a complex, heterogeneous state with diffused centres of control (the industrial type of society), through increased differentiation, separation and specialization of structure and function.

In 1884, Spencer explicitly asserted the practical application of his general philosophical views to contemporary politics in the Contemporary Review, one of the most popular and influential journals of the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> Later that same year, this series of essays was reprinted in a single volume entitled, The Man Versus the State.

The first of the essays making up The Man Versus the State was entitled, "The New Toryism," and dealt with what Spencer believed to be the betrayal of Liberalism and the Liberal Party, a party whose traditional reforms had sought to reduce the sphere of state activity, thereby giving the citizen a wider scope for unhindered self-activity, in accordance with the correct Liberal and correct philosophical principles. Contemporary Liberalism, for Spencer, had lost sight of its proper role. Contemporary Liberals had betrayed the principles of Liberalism, and the proper philosophical notions underpinning them, and in so doing had taken a retrograde step in the face of the natural direction of evolution. 'Liberalism Betrayed' now sought the popular good, "not as an end to be indirectly gained ... but, as an end to be directly gained."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Contemporary Review, Feb., April, May and July, 1884.

<sup>2</sup> H. Spencer, The Man Versus the State, ed., D. Macrae, (London, 1969), p. 67.



Evidence of this betrayal was to be found contained in a long catalogue of legislation: the Seed Supply Act, the Factory Acts, the Bakehouses Act, the Public Works Act, the Contagious Diseases Act, the Public Health Act, the Public Libraries Act, the Agricultural Childrens Act, and the Sea Birds Preservation Act. The consequences of 'Liberalism Betrayed', in so far as it had "been extending the system of compulsion ... is a new form of Toryism," and as such represented a bulwark of a militant type of society.<sup>1</sup>

Having explained the true nature of the deformed Liberalism, Spencer in the second essay, "The Coming Slavery," pointed to the inevitable outcome of the betrayal - the 'Coming Slavery of State Socialism'. For Spencer, the essence of slavery was compulsion. He saw that the increasing amount of regulative legislation, accompanied by a growing administrative machine, was adding a momentum to the accelerated trends towards the 'New Toryism' and the 'Coming Slavery of State Socialism'.

The third essay, "The Sins of Legislators" began with the contention that, "Government is begotten of aggression and by aggression."<sup>2</sup> History, Spencer claimed, was a record of the aggressiveness of the ruling power, both without and within its own society. History was the record of aggressive wars between States, and of the aggression of the ruling power against the ruled. The contemporary sins of aggressive legislators revolved around a fundamentally unsound utilitarianism which threatened social progress. In what might be

<sup>1</sup>H. Spencer, The Man Versus the State, p. 81.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 112.

taken for a working manual of the Webbs, Spencer claimed that the sins of legislators "are not (always) generated by personal ambition or class interests, but result from a lack of study by which they are morally bound to prepare themselves."<sup>1</sup> Lacking a proper knowledge of the laws which governed social progress, ignorant legislators threatened to implement arrangements which were dysfunctional to the evolutionary needs of society. Spencer, no less than the Webbs, concluded that legislators had a duty to study the facts, and the principles of evolution which bound them together.

In the fourth essay, "The Great Political Superstition," Spencer detailed the philosophical bankruptcy underlying the political practice of the 'New Toryism'. For Spencer this bankruptcy emanated from an unsound and mistaken notion of utility. Utility, for Spencer, was to be determined rationally i.e. philosophically and from taking into account the laws of evolution, not empirically from mere head counting by legislators. To return to the true politics, Liberals had first to return to the true principles of rational utility, so that, "the functions of true Liberalism in the future will be that of putting a limit to the powers of Parliament."<sup>2</sup>

Spencer's vilification of Socialism in The Man Versus the State confronts the historian with an interesting paradox - that of a figure denigrative of Socialist ideals as a form of 'New Toryism' and Socialism as 'The Coming Slavery' as an important positive influence upon the early Socialists.

<sup>1</sup>H. Spencer, The Man Versus the State, p. 115.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 183.

It has been the traditional view to deny the paradox. Thus one of the most important historians of the Fabians and Fabian ideas A.M. McBriar: "the whole direction of Spencer's thought was too remote from that of the Fabians to allow him to exert any but a very general influence."<sup>1</sup> G. Lichtheim has also avoided the paradox, arguing that in order to be useful to Socialists Spencer had to be mediated through the Positivists. "Spencer ... was an extreme individualist, and those of his former pupils who later turned to Fabianism had to adopt Comte before they could draw socialist conclusions from their dissatisfaction with liberalism."<sup>2</sup>

The paradox should not be avoided, for its establishment involves a detailed examination of Herbert Spencer as an important bridge between the Radicals and the Socialists, a bridge whose foundations were cemented in evolutionary theory, the practical application of philosophical principles to contemporary politics, and the structural functional method.

Herbert Spencer, born in Derby in 1820, was a product of the provincial non-conformity and Radicalism of the hosiery towns of the East Midlands.<sup>3</sup> With four grandparents as Wesleyan Methodists, Spencer loudly and proudly proclaimed his inheritance of Radical Dissent. Through his father, a Dissenting schoolmaster, and his associations with the Derby Philosophical Society, which had close

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<sup>1</sup>A.M. McBriar, Fabian Socialism and English Politics (Cambridge, 1962), p. 62.

<sup>2</sup>G. Lichtheim, A Short History of Socialism (London, 1970), p. 175.

<sup>3</sup>For further discussion of Spencer's place within the tradition of provincial Dissent see J.D.Y. Peel, Herbert Spencer: The Evolution of a Sociologist (London, 1971).

links with the Lunar Society of Birmingham and the tradition of Joseph Priestly, Spencer imbibed the great tradition of provincial science and radicalism. Radical and Dissenting opinion, opposed to a corrupt state dominated by a landed aristocracy and an established Church, were at the very roots of Spencer's earliest political philosophy. In the 1840's Herbert Spencer involved himself in the radical politics of the Complete Suffrage Union, the Anti-State Church Association, and the Anti-Corn Law League. Spencer's concern with the land question and the position of the landed aristocracy was reflected in his very first work, Social Statics, published in 1850. The early part of that work describes a theory of social justice, in which the greatest happiness is secured by allowing each the freedom consistent with the equal freedom of others. Spencer proceeded to consider the application of this law of equal freedom in a variety of fields. One application of the principle had important implications for the Socialist movement of the 1880's. That application was to the land question, and involved the demonstration of the right to the use of the earth. Spencer showed that in accordance with the law of equal freedom, all men have equal rights to the land, and consequently that no man had the right to use the land in such a way as to prevent others from using it. Equity, asserted Spencer, did not permit private property."<sup>1</sup> Spencer's conclusion was that justice commanded a change in the existing system of land tenure. The change which Spencer advocated was the nationalization of land.

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<sup>1</sup>H. Spencer, Social Statics (London, 1850), p. 134.



The influence of Ricardo and J.S. Mill on the Socialists as regards the land question has been generally acknowledged, whilst the importance of Spencer (whose position on the land question was in advance of either Mill or Ricardo) within the tradition of Radical opposition to the landed interest has been largely ignored. Although Mill eventually came to accept the principle of land nationalization, for the Socialists it was (as Sidney Webb pointed out) Herbert Spencer who "demonstrated the incompatibility of full private property in land with the modern democratic state."<sup>1</sup>

Social Statics has a place in the ongoing tradition of radical opposition on the land question and stands as a bridge between the Radicals and the Socialists since it was raised to prominence by the issue of land reform in Ireland in the 1860's and 1870's, and by the agricultural depression and the acute unrest among the smallholders in areas such as Wales and Scotland. Spencer's doctrine of the right to the use of the earth found a new and wide audience.

When Professor Alfred Russell Wallace, who with J.S. Mill, was a prominent member of the Land Tenure Reform Association, in an article for the Contemporary Review, formally proposed land nationalization as a radical solution to the Irish land problem, he acknowledged that it had been Spencer's Social Statics which had first convinced him of "the immorality and impolicy of private property in land."<sup>2</sup>

Historians have tended to lose sight of Spencer's contribution to thinking on the land reform question. The popularity of Henry

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<sup>1</sup>S. Webb, "Historic", Fabian Essays, ed. G.B. Shaw (London, 1908), p. 60.

<sup>2</sup>A.R. Wallace, "How to Nationalize the Land: A Radical Solution to the Irish Land Problem," Contemporary Review, Vol. 38, Nov. 1880, pp. 716-36.

George, and the enormous sales of Progress and Poverty have been allowed to completely overshadow Spencer's prior contribution. Henry George's influence may not be properly doubted, but what may be doubted is the extent to which it should be allowed to obscure other influences. The land question was, after all, already a prominent issue by the time George's Progress and Poverty became popular in England. As Sidney Olivier of the Fabian Society was at pains to point out, the importance of Henry George was to bring the land question "into the general notice of others than the readers of Mill and Spencer."<sup>1</sup>

Henry Sidgwick realized that the Spencerian doctrine of equal freedom was an important and integral part of the "semi-socialist" movement. Socialism, he maintained, was but "an attempt to realize natural justice as taught by Mr. Spencer."<sup>2</sup> With considerable chagrin, Spencer acknowledged as much himself in The Man Versus the State. He distressfully observed that the movement for land nationalization had served as the "basis of a scheme going more than half-way to State Socialism."<sup>3</sup>

The Socialists themselves often acknowledged as much. In a pamphlet written by a Socialist under the pseudonym of 'Frank Fairman',<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>S. Olivier to G. Wallas, Nov. 15, 1882 in Sydney Olivier, Letters and Selected Writings, ed. M. Olivier (London, 1948), p. 54.

<sup>2</sup>H. Sidgwick, "Economic Socialism," Contemporary Review, Vol. 50, Nov. 1886, p. 628.

<sup>3</sup>H. Spencer, The Man Versus the State, p. 97.

<sup>4</sup>The name is probably pseudonymous. When it appeared in the columns of Justice it was in quotation marks. Justice July 11, 1884.

in 1884, it was suggested that probably no-one, not even Dr. Marx, had done more to spread Socialistic ideas in England than Herbert Spencer. The "inexorable logic" of Spencer's early works could, Fairman maintained, "hardly fail to convince ... of the necessity of at least as radical a reconstruction of society as even the Social Democratic Federation can desire." Spencer's law of equal freedom when applied to the land question, asserted Fairman, led inevitably and inexorably to Socialism.<sup>1</sup>

James Leatham (referred to by the editor of the journal Progress as, "an earnest and able Socialist") exclaimed,

I hold that the principles of Sociology laid down by Spencer lead to Socialism ... the ideal standards of the Socialist Sociology are the standards of social duty laid down by Herbert Spencer in his "Social Statics"... It requires that the land shall be nationalized ... that 'the freedom of each shall be limited by the like freedom of all'.<sup>2</sup>

In Fabian Essays both Sidney Webb and Sydney Olivier acknowledged their indebtedness to Spencer on the land question; for the solution to which Olivier averred to "Mr. Herbert Spencer in his generous youth that private property in land is incompatible with the fundamental right of each individual to live and to own the produce of his labour."<sup>3</sup>

Although Spencer had explicitly supplied a radical solution to the land question, when he saw that the Socialists were pursuing the conclusions of his law of equal freedom, and doctrine of the right to

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<sup>1</sup>F. Fairman, "Herbert Spencer on Socialism, A Reply to the Article Entitled the Coming Slavery," (London, 1884), p. 4.

<sup>2</sup>J. Leatham, "The New Sociology Vindicated", Progress, Vol. 7, August, 1887, pp. 241-242.

<sup>3</sup>S. Olivier, "Moral", Fabian Essays, , p. 104, (My emphasis). See S. Webb, "Historic" p. 60.

the use of the soil, he attempted to distinguish between the philosophical principles he had enunciated, and the policy conclusions which were being forcibly drawn from them. In successive editions of Social Statics, Spencer's early attacks upon private land ownership were revised, and finally abridged. Spencer disavowed the uses to which Socialists had put his ideas. Later in his life, while maintaining that the principles laid down in Social Statics were equitable in the abstract, he completely refused to recognize the status of the deductions drawn from them.<sup>1</sup>

Henry George had hoped to enlist the great philosopher's prestige behind his own movement. In 1882, while on his trip to Britain, George met with Spencer at the home of H.M. Hyndman. Spencer dashed any hopes George might have entertained in that quarter by declaring total satisfaction with the imprisonment of the Irish Land Leaguers.

The Man Versus the State is to be seen in the light of Spencer's painstaking attempt in the latter part of his life to publicly distinguish between his own philosophical principles and the political conclusions which the Socialists and others had drawn from them. However, if it's publication was intended by the author to discourage the radical usages to which his works had been put, The Man Versus the State became, in fact, the opportunity for further radical propaganda.

Spencer's delineation of the political frontiers of his views drew this immediate reply from R. Percy B. Frost in the columns of

<sup>1</sup>See successive editions of Social Statics, see also, The Man Versus the State, p. 97, and Spencer's contribution to A Symposium on the Land Question, ed. J.H. Levy (London, 1890).

Justice:

It is not some years since Mr. Herbert Spencer laid down in "Social Statics" as the law of right social relationships that - 'Every man should have freedom to do all that he will provided that he infringes not the equal freedom of any other man.' Mr. Spencer evidently considers however that society has not yet reached the stage of social development in which any general recognition of that principle can be looked for, since he comes forward in the current number of the "Contemporary" as the champion of individualism, a system of society in which the law of social relationships is 'Each man for himself' without regard to any others. <sup>1</sup>

Frank Fairman's specific reply to the articles in the Contemporary Review has already been noted, <sup>2</sup> and H.M. Hyndman added his own weight to the Socialist critique. <sup>3</sup> Not unnaturally his critics deplored what they considered Spencer's volte-face. Whereas Frederic Harrison considered "Herbert Spencer Against All England" a more appropriate title for The Man Versus the State, James Leatham suggested "Herbert Spencer Against Himself." <sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>R. Percy B. Frost, "Mr. Herbert Spencer on Socialism," Justice, April 12, 1884.

<sup>2</sup>F. Fairman, "Herbert Spencer on Socialism," . Fairman wondered if Spencer was "laughing up his sleeve at the British public, and enjoying the joke of being held up as the Defender of the universal-scramble and Devil-take-the hindmost Faith which not once only, but all his life, he has laboured to destroy." Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>3</sup>See H.M. Hyndman, Socialism and Slavery, Being an Answer to Mr. Herbert Spencer's Attack Upon the Democratic Federation (London, 1884).

<sup>4</sup>See J. Leatham, "The New Sociology Vindicated," pp. 241-242.



This theme of the self-contradictory nature of Spencer's 'late period' was subsequently elaborated upon by Webb and Henry George, the latter characteristically the most caustic.<sup>1</sup> In a lengthy attack on Spencer entitled A Perplexed Philosopher George wrote:

Try Herbert Spencer by the ideas that he once held ... Try him by the principles of Social Statics, or try him by the principles of Justice. In this chapter he proves himself alike a traitor to all that he once held, and to all that he now holds - a conscious and deliberate traitor who assumes the place of the philosopher, the office of the judge, only to darken truth and deny justice; to sell out the right of the wronged and to prostitute his powers in the defence of the wronger.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, if Spencer was at pains to distinguish between his own principles and the abuse of them by others, the Socialists were equally careful to critically contrast his 'early' and 'late' periods. They were quick to enlist the prestige of science in the cause of Socialism, and quite naturally considered Spencer's individualism to be inconsistent with his former scientific teachings.

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<sup>1</sup>Sidney Webb accused Spencer of desiring "to bring back the legal position which made possible the 'white slavery' of which the 'sins of legislators' have deprived us." In a footnote he added that, "Few ... of Mr. Spencer's followers appear to realize that he presupposes Land Nationalization as the necessary condition of an Individualist community." "Historic" \_\_\_\_\_, p. 41.

<sup>2</sup>H. George, A Perplexed Philosopher (N.Y., 1892), p. 225. George also said, "Mr. Spencer is like one who might insist that each should swim for himself in crossing a river, ignoring the fact that some had been artificially provided with corks and others artificially loaded with lead." Ibid., p. 87.

The middle decades of the nineteenth century were characterized by rapid scientific, technical and economic advance, and Spencer's ambitious attempt to systematize the application of contemporary biological scientific theories to social and philosophical questions evoked a receptive response in an age in which the vogue of "science was by far the most potent ferment at work in the mental environment."<sup>1</sup> Beatrice Webb observed the intoxication of the mid-Victorian age by the cult of science and the idea of progress:

It is hard to understand the naïve belief of the most original and vigorous minds of the seventies and eighties that it was by science, and by science alone, that all human misery would be ultimately swept away. This almost fanatical faith was perhaps partly due to hero-worship. For who will deny that the men of science were the leading British intellectuals of that period; that it was they who stood out as men of genius with international reputations; that it was they who were the self-confident militants of the period; that it was they who were routing the theologians, confounding the mystics, imposing their theories on philosophers, their inventions on capitalists, and their discoveries on medical men; whilst they were at the same time snubbing the artists, ignoring the poets and even casting doubt on the capacity of the politicians? Nor was the cult of scientific method confined to intellectuals. 'Halls of Science' were springing up in the crowded working class districts; and Bradlaugh, the fearless exponent of scientific materialism and the 'Fruits of Philosophy', was the most popular demagogue of the hour ... Indeed, in the seventies and eighties it looked as if whole sections of the British proletariat - and these the elite - would be swept, like the corresponding class on the Continent, into a secularist movement.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>B. Webb, My Apprenticeship (London, 1971), p. 144. See S. Webb, "The New Learning of the Nineteenth Century," Lecture to the Zetetical Society, c. 1880, Passfield Papers (pp), VI, 2.

<sup>2</sup>B. Webb, My Apprenticeship, pp. 146-7.

This predominating interest in scientific and technical developments is indicated by the extensive coverage of these subjects in the popular literature of the day. Throughout the 1870's and 1880's the retrospect of literature in the Annual Register drew attention to the continuing high level of interest shown in science and subjects scientific, as represented by the large volume of works newly devoted to those topics. The report for 1884 is typical:

It would appear as if writings of any importance ... become more and more confined to science and subjects of technical interest generally, they absorb, apparently, the intellectual vitality of the writing world with very few exceptions.<sup>1</sup>

In the world of fiction writing it is worthy of note that the tradition of Job Legh in Mrs. Gaskell's Mary Barton or Alton Locke in C. Kingsley's novel by the same name was continued in the popular literature of the 1870's and 1880's. The central character in the most popular novel of the 1880's, Mrs. Humphrey Ward's Robert Elsmere, displayed the same characteristic enthusiasm for the natural sciences; and science was exalted in the widely read Martyrdom of Man by Winwood Reade.<sup>2</sup>

There was a growing demand for lectures as well as publications to make the results of scientific discoveries accessible to the lay public. Remarking upon the appearance of "messengers" from the rapidly spreading Halls of Science at open air meetings, Beatrice Webb

<sup>1</sup>Retrospect of Literature, Annual Register, 1884.

<sup>2</sup>"To illustrate the idolisation of science" in the 1870 and 1880's, Beatrice Webb quoted extensively from the Martyrdom of Man. B. Webb, My Apprenticeship, pp. 147-148.



noted that radical secularism had found new outlets through extensive popular interest in science.<sup>1</sup> Charles Bradlaugh, Annie Besant, together with the Darwinian Marxist, Edward Aveling, were regular speakers on scientific topics at the London Halls of Science.

The attention devoted to science in Mrs. Besant's journal Our Corner is also significant. An analysis of the four year period 1883-1886 shows that of the twenty-nine issues only one was without a single feature on science. Approximately half of the issues carried two or more articles on science, and all contained a regular scientific corner. (Mrs. Besant was supposed to know through her associations with left-wing Radicalism and Bradlaugh "more of the views of the (educated) working class than all other Socialists put together."<sup>2</sup> It is perhaps not unreasonable to assume, then, that the considerable attention devoted to scientific subjects in Our Corner reflected not only its editor's special interests, but also those of its readership.)

Closely allied to the vogue of science was the belief in the Idea of Progress, rooted, as Huxley suggested in the Victorian idea of man's "long progress through the past" was a "reasonable ground of faith in his attainment of a nobler future."<sup>3</sup> John Morley, an ineffectual publicist and Liberal statesman who had positivist sympathies, went further:

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<sup>1</sup>B. Webb, My Apprenticeship, pp. 304-305, 146-147.

<sup>2</sup>See H. Bland, "The Socialist Party in Relation to Politics," Practical Socialist, October, 1886.

<sup>3</sup>Quoted in J.B. Bury, The Idea of Progress (N.Y., 1932), p.342.

Belief in progress had become the basis of social thought and had even taken the place of religion as the inspiring, guiding, and testing power of social action.<sup>1</sup>

In an important article, S.G. Checkland links the Victorian belief in progress to the contemporary faith in evolutionary theories:

the idea of a meliorative trend embodied in the evolutionary principle, was strongly held ... (the idea of science) envisaged cumulative change, the change was always for the better.<sup>2</sup>

In seeking to establish that Newtonianism had relaxed its grip upon the minds of students of society as the scientific limelight had passed from astro-physics to biology, Checkland can be faulted for ignoring the pervasive influence of Spencer in infusing the evolutionary idea into the social and economic thinking of Victorian Britain. In his well-known work The Idea of Progress J.B. Bury asserted that Spencer's "synthesis of the world process lucidly and persuasively developed, probably did more than any other work ... both to drive home the significance of the doctrine of evolution and to raise the doctrine of Progress to the rank of a common place truth in the popular estimation."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>J.V. Morley, Recollections (N.Y., 1917), Vol. I, p.26.

<sup>2</sup>S.G. Checkland, "Growth and Progress: The Nineteenth Century View in Britain," Economic History Review, Vol. 12, 1959-1960, p.55.

<sup>3</sup>J.B. Bury, The Idea of Progress, p. 341.

Coming to maturity in the accepted incandescence of the achievements of English science, the Socialists of the 1880's accepted an optimistic, evolutionary outlook almost "as a matter of course."<sup>1</sup> They naturally read Darwin and Huxley, but it was pre-eminently Herbert Spencer who illuminated "the previous darkness by lucid exposition and by pregnant suggestion."<sup>2</sup> As radicals, the Socialists were obviously indebted to Spencer for persuading the world that for society, as for the rest of organic life, change was its natural condition. The debt was generously acknowledged. Sidney Webb (who maintained that "the great generalities which ... must change the whole drift of Philosophy, are the Conservation of Energy and Evolution") hailed Spencer as "The first thinker of importance who has fully assimilated the newest ideas."<sup>3</sup> In his history of the Fabian Society, Edward Pease indicated that "Herbert Spencer, then deemed the greatest of English thinkers, was pouring out in portentous phraseology the enormous significance of Evolution,"<sup>4</sup> and no less than eight of Spencer's works were recommended in the Society's "What to Read, A List of Books for Social Reformers."<sup>5</sup>

Less obviously intellectual figures such as Ben Tillet, Tom Maguire and James Ramsey MacDonald had read Spencer, along with other contemporary scientific thinkers. Tillet cited Spencer, along with

<sup>1</sup>E.R. Pease, The History of the Fabian Society (London, 1926), p.17.

<sup>2</sup>A. Besant, Why I Am a Socialist (London, 1886), p. 3.

<sup>3</sup>S. Webb, "The New Learning of the Nineteenth Century."

<sup>4</sup>E.R. Pease, The History of the Fabian Society, p.17.

<sup>5</sup>Fabian Tract No. 29.

Huxley, Darwin, Hackle, Carlyle and Cardinal Newman), as formative influences upon his intellectual development,<sup>1</sup> and it is unsurprising to anyone familiar with the tortured biological analogies of J.R. MacDonald's later speeches to learn that "his favourite studies were biological. Along with Ritchie's Darwinism and Politics, Spencer influenced him the most."<sup>2</sup> H.M. Hyndman paid Spencer the tribute of a special reply to The Man Versus the State.<sup>3</sup> In the pages of Justice, no less than in Commonweal and Progress, Spencerian influence is apparent. As with Hyndman in England for All, there is frequently a failure to identify the authority for the evolutionary perspective, but in the detailed analogy of the social organism, and the insistence on scientific investigation, the stamp of Spencer is clear.

The mark which Spencer left upon the early Socialists was the mark of evolution. Society, for Spencer, was like any other organism, and evolved through the integration of its constituent matter into a larger, denser and more complex, coherent mass by losing momentum. As the social organism grew in mass and complexity, its structure increased in size and complexity, and different parts of the structure became differentiated and specialized in the functions which they performed for the organism. With increased functional adaptation of the parts of the structure to meet the more complex needs of the evolving organism, came greater interdependence between parts of the structure.

<sup>1</sup>B. Tillett, Memories and Reflections (London, 1931), p. 77.

<sup>2</sup>M. Beer, History of British Socialism (London, 1919), p. 312.

<sup>3</sup>H.M. Hyndman, Socialism and Slavery.

At this general level an argument for Socialism which proceeded from accepted scientific authority was attractive in an age enamoured of science. By showing Socialism to be the scientific outcome of evolution, the prestige of science could be enlisted to add to the authority of the prescriptive judgments of Socialists. The argument from science was a powerful one, and in this regard Spencer's name had the clear ring of authority. Thus Tom Maguire declared, "We now recognize evolution to be the groundwork of every science," and referred to Mr. Herbert Spencer's The Study of Sociology as the key to the discovery of the nature of social development and progress.<sup>1</sup> Annie Besant, in Why I Am a Socialist declared at one point, "I am a socialist because I believe in Evolution."<sup>2</sup>

This was precisely the kind of intellectual opportunism which had been recommended by the American Socialist, Lawrence Gronlund, both in his lecture tour of England in 1885, and in his best known work, The Co-operative Commonwealth:

We cannot conceive of any better way of propagating socialist ideas than to show them to be the logical outcome of the best modern thoughts.<sup>3</sup>

Gronlund himself used Spencer in precisely this way, turning the organic analogy against the laissez-faire conclusions of its author.

<sup>1</sup>T. Maguire, "Mr. Chamberlain and Socialism," Progress, Vol. 5, July, 1888, p. 317.

<sup>2</sup>A. Besant, Why I Am a Socialist, p. 2.

<sup>3</sup>L. Gronlund, The Co-operative Commonwealth, ed. Stow Persons (Cambridge, Mass., 1965), p. 220. Also see L. Gronlund, "The Work Before Us," Commonweal, Supplement, July, 1885.



Let us then give due credit to Herbert Spencer for his profound speculations on the social organism. He has, indeed, in them laid the foundations for constructive socialism.<sup>1</sup>

Hyndman declared that "Socialists are perfectly satisfied with the exposition of middle class philosophy by its principle champion."<sup>2</sup> And Webb, who sometimes pirated Spencer's style and who had exploited Spencer's illustrative examples, was not beneath opportunism of this kind.<sup>3</sup>

At another general level, the Socialists used evolution to demonstrate that the idea of progress was unthinkable apart from the idea of Socialism, to demonstrate that Socialism was the logical outcome of progress. Thus Sidney Webb wrote:

We can no longer think of the ideal society as an unchanging state. The social ideal from being static has become dynamic ... No philosopher now looks for anything but the gradual evolution of the new order from the old.<sup>4</sup>

Hyndman made very much the same point in his reply to Spencer's

The Man Versus the State:

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<sup>1</sup>L. Gronlund, The Co-operative Commonwealth, p. 78.

<sup>2</sup>H.M. Hyndman, Socialism and Slavery, p. 24.

<sup>3</sup>Compare the lists on state-ownership and control in S. Webb, "Historic", p. 51, with H. Spencer, The Man Versus the State, p. 105.

<sup>4</sup>S. Webb, "Historic," p. 31.

While his (Spencer's) admission that somehow in spite of all his objections, the evolution of society is carrying us necessarily further and further into State or Municipal Management has led a considerable number of those who have been taught the doctrine of evolution by Mr. Spencer himself to accept socialism as the only logical outcome.<sup>1</sup>

This apparently paradoxical use of the 'champion of middle class philosophy' by the Socialists involved an attribution of contradiction as between Spencer's scientific theories and political doctrines. Spencer has been challenged as to the compatability of his evolutionary-organic theories and his individualistic political beliefs both by his contemporaries and by later scholars, who have not only denied that the organic analogy supports laissez-faire doctrine, but have rather argued that the analogy dictates a positive view of state action. The major road from Spencer to Socialism lay through this alleged contradiction; and the Socialists themselves split the paradox by driving a wedge between Spencer's scientific theories and the political and policy conclusions he drew from them.

Spencer's scientific theories had elevated the commonplace notion that societies were somehow generally similar to individual organisms to the level of detailed analysis, in which growth, increase in structure, and differentiation and integration of structure and function involving a progressive change from homogeneity to heterogeneity, were the organizational principles in societies as in animal organisms. For both Spencer and for his critics the political inferences to be drawn from the evolutionary organic analogy revolved about the argument

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<sup>1</sup>H.M. Hyndman, Socialism and Slavery, pp. 23-24.

regarding the nervous or controlling system. Both were agreed that, in general, in simple organisms the nervous system is dispersed throughout the structure, whereas higher forms display a complex centralized controlling system. Thus evolutionary development involved a growth in structure, and a corresponding growth of the nervous or controlling system. From a relatively simple, homogeneous and dispersed regulating system a large, complex, heterogeneous central regulating system developed.

T.H. Huxley, in an article entitled "Administrative Nihilism" written for the Fortnightly Review argued that Spencer had drawn false socio-political conclusions from his biological laws.

With what singular closeness a parallel between the development of a nervous system which is the governing power of the body in the series of animal organisms, and that of government in the series of social organisms, can be drawn.

This being so, Huxley continued,

All this appears to be very just. But if the resemblance between the body physiological and the body politic are any indication, not only of what the latter is, and how it has become what it is, but of what it ought to become, and what it is tending to become, I cannot but think that the real force of the analogy is totally opposed to the negative view of the state function.

"Suppose," says Huxley, "every cell left free to follow its own 'interest' and laissez-faire, Lord of all, what would become of the body physiological?" In fact,



If the analogy of the body politic with the body physiological counts for anything, it seems to me to be in favour of a much larger amount of governmental interference than exists at present.<sup>1</sup>

Socialists approved the concept of a social organism, with its stress upon unity and the interdependence of parts, and were quick to seize and synthesise Huxley's criticism in "Administrative Nihilism," to argue that the organic analogy suggested the inevitability as well as the desirability of a centralized, collectivist state. Tom Maguire expressed his approval of Spencer's organic view, while at the same time observing that "it is the 'let alone' inference whereof the whole of his conclusory observations smack."<sup>2</sup>

James Leatham, a Socialist contributor to the journal Progress, declared:

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<sup>1</sup>T.H. Huxley, "Administrative Nihilism," Fortnightly Review, Vol. X (n.s.), 1871, pp. 534-535. Other scholars have made similar criticisms. W.M. Simon has argued that Spencer's political doctrines were not deducible from his philosophical premises; and that the analogy of the social organism pointed to collectivism rather than laissez-faire individualism. "Spencer's adherence to the concept of the 'social organism' (Simon wrote) led Spencer at times to attenuate his political doctrine so he could maintain that doctrine in fact only by infringing on the integrity of the biological analogy." "Herbert Spencer and the 'Social Organism'" Journal of the History of Ideas, Vol. XXI, 1960, p. 298. Similarly, D. Macrae wrote: "Thus, while the organic analogy is 'instructive' it is also wrong; the units are altogether different in kind. It may be - and surely is - a muddle to derive laissez-faire politics and economics from the organic analogy, and indeed, that argument should run in the direction of praising and encouraging an omnipotent state." Introductory essay to The Man Versus the State, Op. Cit., p. 27. Also see S. Andreski's introductory essay to Herbert Spencer: Structure, Function and Evolution (London, 1972), p. 28.

<sup>2</sup>T. Maguire, "Mr. Chamberlain and Socialism," p. 317.

Herbert Spencer stands alone almost as the prophet of the ideal life. He calls himself neither Socialist nor Communist; but with patient, thoughtful and systematic inquiry, he is guiding us to regions which he knows not of and is doing more for the cause of righteousness than a whole school of more ardent and violent agitators.<sup>1</sup>

The Socialists who had in general been quick to harness Spencer's theories regarding the evolution of the social organism to the Socialist cause were no less adept in slaying the 'champion of middle class philosophy' with the stones of his own former making by their insistence that the evolutionary-organic analogy logically supported and encouraged state activity. Thus despite Spencer's fulminations against collectivism in The Man Versus the State it was "the belief of socialists that Spencer had made Scientific Socialism possible and even exact by his arguments in illustration of the organic nature of society."<sup>2</sup>

Gronlund declared that while Spencer might be the "apostle of individualism," he had presented "splendid arguments in favour of the organic character of society."<sup>3</sup> The organic view, Gronlund argued, was inexorably socialistic because the "correspondence between the distributing system of animals and the distributing system of bodies politic" was an argument for the positive view of state functions. To the division of labour, Gronlund said, "add the central regulative system which Spencer says distinguishes all highly organized structures and which supplies each organ with blood in proportion to the work it does and - behold the CO-OPERATIVE COMMONWEALTH."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>J. Leatham, "The New Sociology," Progress, Vol. 7, April, 1887, p. 110.

<sup>2</sup>J. Leatham, "The New Sociology Vindicated," p. 243.

<sup>3</sup>L. Gronlund, The Co-operative Commonwealth, p. 78.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 90.

D.G. Ritchie, in his best known works, Darwinism and Politics and The Principles of State Interference also argued that Spencer's political conclusions were not deducible from his biological arguments. The review of Darwinism and Politics in the journal To-Day suggested to Socialists the significance of the alleged contradiction between Spencer's organic analogy and his 'administrative nihilism'. The reviewer, presumably Ritchie's fellow Fabian, H. Bland, significantly pointed out that "not a single argument is brought forward, not a solitary suggestion made, which has not been current coin among Socialist lecturers for the last eight years."<sup>1</sup>

Thus, while Spencer's Socialist critics argued the efficacy of Socialism on grounds that organisms regarded as higher displayed a greater centralization of the nervous system, they also stressed the implications of the greater interdependence and integration of parts for increased centralized control. Annie Besant, in her most popular tract wrote of this tendency in terms that were almost a paraphrase of Spencer, "The great truths that organisms are not isolated creations, but that they are linked together as parts of one great tree of life; that the simple precedes the complex; that progress is a process of continued integrations and ever-increasing differentiations."<sup>2</sup> In a further tract Besant found in Spencer's law of differentiation and concomitant integration of matter the 'scientific' basis of Socialism, and to the extent that Society was steadily "evolving towards a more highly developed individuality of units, and towards their closer

<sup>1</sup>To-Day, Vol. II, April, 1889.

<sup>2</sup>A. Besant, Why I Am a Socialist, p. 2; and compare Herbert Spencer's universal law of evolution, First Principles, p. 396.

co-ordination." the implications of evolutionary organicism were clear - social integration, indeed human progress itself, depended upon the development of centralized, collective organs of administration.<sup>1</sup>

Evolutionary theory was used to show that the inevitable progress toward Socialism was desirable, and represented a higher form of development. The organic analogy was utilised to demonstrate that the growth and progression of society would inevitably and desirably lead to greater centralized control. The organic conception of society stressed the claims of a higher form of society against an untrammelled individualism. By pointing to an asserted logical inconsistency between **Spencer's** biological theories and his political and policy conclusions Socialists used 'the greatest living philosopher' against himself.

Prior to the Socialists' adoption of the charge of 'administrative nihilism', Spencer had publicly answered Huxley's criticisms in an article for the Fortnightly Review,<sup>2</sup> in which he conceded that a common sense view of the organic analogy would lead to the conclusion that the State should be positively regulative. However, he pointed out that sociological processes go beyond the conceptions of common sense; and by a distinction which he characterized as "Specialized Administration" Spencer attempted to demonstrate that there was no incongruity between the scientific analysis of the evolution of the social organism and his political doctrine of the negative role of the State.

Spencer's argument, which was subsequently expanded in Principles of Sociology, maintained that during evolution the regulating system of organisms, both individual and social, divided into two systems,

<sup>1</sup>A. Besant, The Evolution of Society (London, 1886), p. 24.

<sup>2</sup>H. Spencer, "Specialized Administration," Fortnightly Review, Dec. 1871. Reprinted in Essays: Scientific, Political and Speculative (London, 1878), Vol. III.



one controlling internal activity, the other external activity. The two systems although co-ordinated, carried out their differentiated functions with substantial independence. Whilst it was necessary that the outer nervous system that reacted to external events be highly centralized, in order to ensure disciplined responses, the inner nervous system, whose functions were regular and uniform did not require that same centralization of control. The internal activities of organisms, were, Spencer insisted, "regulated by a nervous system which is to a large extent independent of that higher and more complex nervous system controlling the external organs."<sup>1</sup>

Thus, in both individual and social organisms, a complex nervous system evolved through a process of differentiation and bifurcation of the nervous structure. In the social organism as in the individual organism the outer parts which reacted to the external environment developed under a rigorous central control, which did not influence the inner regulating system except in a negative way.

Spencer qualified the point by emphasising that there was a 'cardinal difference' between individual and social organisms; that there was not a social sensorium analogous to the single centre of consciousness of an individual organism.<sup>2</sup> However, in terms of structure and function he insisted that the biological analogy was sound. By the careful arguments of "Specialized Administration" in

<sup>1</sup>H. Spencer, "Specialized Administration," pp. 133-134. Also see Principles of Sociology, (London, 1887), Vol. I, pp. 550-562.

<sup>2</sup>Contrast with S. Webb, "Rome: A Sermon in Sociology," Our Corner Vol. XII, July and August, 1888, in passim. Here Webb seems to want to push the analogy further than Spencer had been prepared to do and argue that there was a 'social sensorium.' In "The Difficulties of Individualism," Webb said, that while there was no "common sensorium, a society is something more than the sum of its members; that a social organism has a life and health distinguishable from those of its individual atoms." Fabian Tract, No. 69.



which the governing structures of both bodies individual and bodies politic were divided into positively regulative and negatively regulative, Spencer believed that he had not only maintained the integrity of the biological analogy but that he had rescued it for the defence of laissez-faire.

It was, perhaps, the glaring neglect of the Socialists to acknowledge the arguments put forward in "Specialized Administration" and later in Principles of Sociology which prompted The Man Versus the State, the most polemical of Spencer's work. As has been seen, the subtly qualified argument of "Specialized Administration" continued, however, to be wholly and studiously ignored by Socialists, although they cannot have failed to have been aware of it. Although in the final analysis the argument from analogy could not definitively establish either position, and while Spencer's alleged contradiction was by no means as flagrant as the Socialists took it to be, their idealisation of socially centralizing tendencies was left largely untouched.

Spencer's lasting contribution to the development of Socialist thought and policy was the legacy of the concept of society as a functioning system, susceptible to scientific study, which he left to the Webbs. From the organic analogy which saw society as an inter-dependent system with complex functional relationships Spencer derived the conceptual and analytical tools of function and structure. Functional integration, differentiation and adaptation characterized social as well as organic development, and the key to social development was essentially the evolution of functions to meet needs, and structures to provide functions. The Webb's adopted the Spencerian structural functional method, and it shaped not only their studies of the genesis of social institutions, but the practical political out-

look of their Fabian Socialism. Perhaps as Leonard Woolf remarked of the Webbs:

It was ... natural, indeed, inevitable that sooner or later someone should apply to Cabinets, trade unions and parish councils the methods which had revealed so much about rocks, apes and earthworms.<sup>1</sup>

Beatrice's debt to Spencer in this respect is well known. He encouraged her to become a social investigator, and to think about human institutions as biologists thought about plants or animals; and for her part Beatrice instructed others as she had been instructed, advising them to "follow the example of great men of other and older sciences in their methods of investigation," beginning the study of a particular institution just as one would the "study of an animal or plant."<sup>2</sup> Spencer taught Beatrice to look at institutions in an evolutionary, organic and functional manner, and from her diary entries of the 1880's to her BBC talks on how to study the social question of the 1930's, her underlying assumption was that all institutions and group structures were interrelated as a whole, and that the method of explaining the action of any one part was to discover how that part co-existed with, or affected, the other parts, and how it functioned relative to the whole.

Beatrice Webb's view of society was of an interdependent system of specialized parts acting together to bring about the adaption of

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<sup>1</sup>L. Woolf, "Political Thought and the Webbs," in The Webbs and Their Work, ed. M. Cole, (London, 1949), p. 255.

<sup>2</sup>B. Webb, "How to Study the Social Question," p. 1, PP VI, 80; "The Diseases of Organized Society," The Listener, Jan. 13, 1932, p. 48, PP VI, 84.

the social structure to the environment. This idea was also one basis of her belief in Socialism. Spencer's idea of functional adaptation was, wrote Beatrice to her diary, "at the basis of a good deal of faith in collective regulation that I afterward developed."<sup>1</sup> Beatrice saw the role of the social reformer as "expressing in colloquial language the equally true and important biological fact, the modification of structure brought about by the modification of function, in other words, the law of functional adaptation."<sup>2</sup>

Although the Webb's joint studies followed a course charted in the main by Beatrice, Sidney had been independently much influenced by Spencerian sociology. His early lectures to the Zetetical Society were indicative of Sidney's structural functionalist approach. In the lecture "Heredity as an Important Factor in Psychology and Ethics" Webb closely approached Spencer's suggestion in the Transcendental Psychology that the only law of organic modification was the law of functional adaptation.<sup>3</sup> Webb's acceptance of Spencerian sociology was even more apparent in the series of lectures on social and economic history that he delivered in the mid-eighties, in which the insistence upon the evolutionary and organic nature of society was clearly rooted in the Spencerian conceptual framework of structure and function.<sup>4</sup> The

<sup>1</sup>B. Webb, "Herbert Spencer and My Search for A Creed," Graphic Survey, Feb. 1926, p. 552, PP VII, 41.

<sup>2</sup>B. Potter, The Co-operative Movement (London, 1891), p. 105.

<sup>3</sup>S. Webb, "Heredity as an Important Factor in Psychology and Ethics," lecture to the Zetetical Society, March 22, 1882, PP VI, 5.

<sup>4</sup>See particularly "Economic History of Society in England," Oct. 21, 1884, PP VI, 17; and "The Production of Wealth," 1885, PP VI, 23a; and "The Distribution of Wealth," PP VI, 23b.

early influence of Spencerian functional theory was also marked in Webb's contribution to Fabian Essays and "Rome: A Sermon in Sociology." In both articles the individual was regarded as a unit to be properly fitted into a series of functional social relationships.

In their early partnership the Webbs' joint employment of the tools of structural functional analysis was evidenced by their 'analytic histories' of institutional forms. The History of Trade Unionism, written and published within two years of their marriage, was the springboard for what they were to describe as the 'Webb speciality' - "a study, at once historical and analytic, of the life history of particular social institutions."<sup>1</sup> This historical study of trade unionism was an introduction to that larger "scientific analysis of the structure and function of British Trade Unions"<sup>2</sup> which was the concern of Industrial Democracy, the second joint undertaking. It's publication in 1898, illustrated a sociological approach bedded in the premise that "sociology, like all other sciences, can advance only on the basis of a precise observation of actual facts."<sup>3</sup> Exactly employing the binary division of Spencer's Descriptive Sociology, from the 'actual fact' emerged on the one hand a descriptive study of the development of trade union functions. (The Webbs hoped that this "description of structure and function ... will ... have its own permanent value in sociology as an analytical record of trade unionism."<sup>4</sup>) The analytical record thus left to

<sup>1</sup>S. and B. Webb, Methods of Social Study (Cambridge, 1975), p. 89.

<sup>2</sup>B. Webb, Our Partnership (Cambridge, 1975), p. 43.

<sup>3</sup>S. and B. Webb, Industrial Democracy (London, 1897), Vol. I, p.v.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. ix.



posterity involved a study of the functional role of trade unions in contributing to the integration and effectiveness of the developing modern democratic state wherein its authors "ventured into the domain of theory ... (placing) before the student a new analysis of the working of competition in the industrial field ... (their) vision of the organization and working of the business world as it actually exists."<sup>1</sup> Trade union methods and regulations were functionally evaluated on the economic plane according to their promotion of "the selection of the most efficient factors of production, progressive functional adaptation to a higher level, and their combination in the most advanced type of industrial organization."<sup>2</sup> If in the study of the development of trade union structure the Webbs found (and approved of) a trend toward the democratization of the industrial state, their analysis of trade union functions was according to its contribution to the needs of that emerging democratic new order. As far as those economic functions were concerned:

the economist and the statesman will judge Trade Unionism, not by its results in improving the position of a particular section of workmen at a particular time, but by its effects on the permanent efficiency of the nation.<sup>3</sup>

Having identified within the development of trade union structure a trend toward democratic control within the industrial state, and

<sup>1</sup>S. and B. Webb, Industrial Democracy (London, 1897), Vol. I, p.v.

<sup>2</sup>S. and B. Webb, Industrial Democracy, Vol. II, p. 734.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 703.



having analysed the legitimate functions of trade unions in terms of that trend, the Webbs' recommendations for reform of the trade unions as social institutions were intended to enhance the adaptation of structure to function.

The structural functional method which the Webbs adopted from Spencer had profound implications for their political approach, for their socialism became concerned with the technical aspects of social change.

For the Webbs the healthy condition of the social organism like any other organism, required that its constituent parts function correctly in respect of its needs. Consequently, the ill-health of the social organism rested in the specific malfunctions of those constituent parts. The healthy development of the socialistically-evolving organism therefore depended upon the correction of specific malfunctions of its constituent parts. As Fabian Tract No. 70 stated, "The Fabian Society does not put socialism forward as a panacea for the ills of human society, but only those produced by a defective organization of industry and radically bad distribution of wealth."<sup>1</sup> Each 'defect of organization' represented a particular social problem, about which facts could be scientifically collected and analysed and whose solution was through functional and structural changes.

The social structure (which was relative to the functional needs of the evolving social organism) consisted of interdependent functional relationships between the various parts. Like Spencer they drew a distinction between the social organism and the social structure. The structure was simply the temporary manifestation of the functional requirements of the organism, very much as the structure of the body was a manifestation of its adaptation to the environment. The social

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<sup>1</sup>"Report on Fabian Policy," Tract No. 70, 1886.

organism was the historical reality - a living, developing, growing being, adapting and evolving - the social structure was the outward appearance of its functional needs. This is not Hegelianism, but Spencerianism. For the Webbs, the social organism itself was essentially the same creature at the end of the nineteenth century as in the thirteenth, save that it had become larger, more complex, its parts more specialized, differentiated and interdependent, as it had evolved. As it evolved, functional adaptation modified its structure.

From their study of evolution the Webbs concluded that adaptation of the social organism to its industrial environment involved increased centralization. As has been seen, their study of evolution evinced in the Webbs a buoyantly optimistic conviction that the tide of history was running strongly in the direction of socialism, that progress and socialism were the product of evolutionary laws. As the forces of evolution adapted the social organism in a socialist direction, the evolving organism acquired functional needs, so that existing structural arrangements became dysfunctional to the developing needs of the organism. In the conviction that overall evolutionary tendencies were strongly inclined to socialism, the problem of social change for the Webbs involved the necessity to obtain structural arrangements in harmony with the developing functional needs of the social organism.

The Webbs' structural functional approach itself was unable to explain social change; for this the Webbs relied upon their general evolutionary analysis in which the evolutionary tendencies towards socialism were clearly portended. The Webbs, then, had no need for a socialist theory which would simultaneously encompass the problems

of sweating, unemployment, housing, depression, imperialism, war etc. They saw each as a specific, although interdependent, structural arrangement which might be dysfunctional to the needs of a favourably evolving organism. The problem of social change was thus a problem of how the institutional or structural parts could be changed relative to the developing needs of the whole. Since they concluded from a study of Spencer that the whole social organism was evolving towards socialism, and its needs and conditions of health could be established, "direct adaptation" could be substituted for "indirect adaptation."<sup>1</sup> Once scientific investigation had uncovered the working of social structures, and institutions men could assume a "conscious control over social destiny" by making modifications and changes in the particular evils of those institutions.<sup>2</sup> The problem of social change as it presented itself to the Webbs was a problem of how to change the functions of institutions whose interdependent relationships made up the social structure, and in so doing change that structure consistent with the needs of a social organism which was evolving towards socialism. The technical aspects of change concerned the Webbs, for as Beatrice said of her husband, they were not the leaders of men, but the **initiators** of policy.<sup>3</sup>

Thus the Webbs adopted a broadly functionalist approach both in their institutional studies and in their task of reform. Implicit in this approach was a theory of power which might be termed 'elitist-pluralist.' They saw power as being to a degree dispersed throughout

<sup>1</sup> S. Webb, "Historic," [redacted] p. 58.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> B. Webb, Our Partnership, [redacted] p. 214.

the social structure according to the functional needs of parts of the structure to exercise it. Further they pointed to the fact that in the process of evolution toward socialism, power might be dysfunctionally located in certain structures, which would delay the process of functional adaptation. The adaptation of the structure to the evolving needs of the social organism not only created new forms of popular control in the economy but necessitated a relocation of power into the hands of experts who possessed a sound knowledge and understanding of the evolutionary need for functional adaptation, and who could assist the relocation of power within the social system according to the functional needs of the evolving organism.

Accepting a strongly optimistic outlook in which the trend of evolutionary progress towards socialism was unmistakable, the Webbs applied in their institutional studies a form of functional analysis to identify which forms of activity were harmonious with the rise of the new industrial state, and which forms were dysfunctional. The problem of reform thus regarded was a problem for experts equipped with the new analytical tools of a science which was progressively enabling man to extend democratic human control over social forces. In developing this outlook the influence of Herbert Spencer had been crucial.

McBriar was being far too dismissive when he wrote "the whole direction of Spencer's sociological and political thought was too remote from that of the Fabians to allow him to exert any but a very general influence."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>A.M. McBriar, Fabian Socialism and English Politics,  
p. 62.



The law of equal freedom and natural justice propounded by the 'early' Spencer in Social Statics, formed part of the mould from which the early Socialists were cast. His thinking on the land question served as an important bridge between radicalism and socialism.

Spencer's theories of evolutionary organic growth provided the Socialists with a view of the process of social change which went deeper than propaganda, and his functional sociology supplied the Webbs with a method for their socio-historical investigations into the growth of institutions and had important implications for the practical politics and policies of Fabian Socialism.



## THE POSITIVIST TRIBUTARY OF FABIANISM

Positivism has long been recognized as one of the main tributaries of the stream from which Fabian thought flowed.<sup>1</sup> The works of Mill, Spencer, Huxley and Comte were all familiar to the Fabian's generation of English intellectuals. Young, eager, earnest intellectuals, the Fabians read most of the 'advanced' thinkers of the day, frequented the avante garde debating societies and actively participated in humanitarian causes and radical politics. Many attended Positivist lectures and some had friendships with leading Positivists. As Pease, historian and secretary of the Society noted:

most of the free-thinking men of that period read the 'Positive Policy' and other writings of the founder, and spent some Sunday mornings at the little conventicle in Lamb's Conduit Street, or attended on Sunday evenings the Newton Hall Lectures of Frederic Harrison.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>A.M. McBriar recognized two main streams of thought from which Fabianism derived - the English liberal tradition and the Socialist tradition. The English liberal tradition "had absorbed as a tributary much of Positivist doctrine from France." Fabian Socialism and English Politics (Cambridge, 1966), p. 7. Royden Harrison discusses the relationship between Positivism and Fabianism in Before the Socialists (London, 1965), pp. 333 ff. For a more limited account, see W.M. Simon, European Positivism in the Nineteenth Century (Ithaca, N.Y. 1963). George Lichtheim, A Short History of Socialism (London, 1970), gives a somewhat confusing account of Positivism and Fabianism. Also see the account of the secretary and historian of the Fabian Society, Edward Pease, The History of the Fabian Society, (London, 1926). For the latest account see Willard Wolfe, From Radicalism to Socialism (New Haven, 1975), particularly chapter 6 "Sidney Webb: The Positivist Road to Socialism." Wolfe's is the most detailed account and the first to make use of personal papers.

<sup>2</sup>Pease, Op. Cit., p. 18.

W.L. Phillips, a house painter, the treasured working man of the Fabian Society and author of the first tract, "Why Are The Many Poor?", had "embraced the Positivist Philosophy of Auguste Comte."<sup>1</sup> Sidney Ball had been an Oxford friend of F.S. Marvin. In the Fabian tract "The Moral Aspect of Socialism" Ball had quoted Comte and stated that the requisite "moral dynamics of socialism" could be supplied by the Religion of Humanity.<sup>2</sup> William Clarke was well acquainted with Positivism, having frequented Frederic Harrison's house in the early eighties. Graham Wallas had joined Webb and Olivier in reading and discussing the "principle works of Comte."<sup>3</sup> Wallas' correspondence with Olivier reveals an interest in the doctrines of Positivism. Annie Besant was a great admirer of Comte and she produced a short book on his life and work. Beatrice Webb, studied Comte and had acquaintances and close friendships in Positivist circles. Among the major Fabians, Shaw was an exception in being unimpressed by

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<sup>1</sup>M. Cole, The Story of Fabian Socialism (London, 1961), p. 6. The tract itself bears no trace of Positivism.

<sup>2</sup>S. Ball, "The Moral Aspect of Socialism", Tract 72. While the term 'Religion of Humanity' was used in a general rather than specifically Comtean sense, the tract reveals Positivist influence. W.M. Simon notes that Ball's references to Positivism in his letters to Marvin were only lukewarm. See European Positivism in the Nineteenth Century p. 226.

<sup>3</sup>S. Olivier to M. Cox Jan. 22, 1884 in M. Olivier (ed.), Sydney Olivier: Letters and Selected Writings (London, 1948), p. 62. The 'principle works' of Comte undoubtedly included: A General View of Positivism, trans. J.H. Bridges (London, 1865); The Positive Philosophy, trans. and abridged by H. Martineau (London. 1853, 1873); The System of Positive Polity, trans. Bridges et al (London, 1875-77); and Catechism of the Positivist Religion trans. R. Congreve (London, 1858).

Positivism.<sup>1</sup>

That the Fabians were involved with the teachings of Comte, through both reading and personal friendships with English Positivists, is clear. To understand the nature of these early impressions and the extent of their intellectual debt to Positivism, it is worth examining in detail the intellectual biographies of those Fabians about whom substantial evidence of early associations with Positivism survives.

Mrs. Annie Besant, the most widely known and influential Fabian convert of the eighties,<sup>2</sup> was a great admirer of Comte. At the time she joined the Society she was a vice-president of the National Secular Society, co-editor of its weekly paper, The National Reformer, and publisher of the monthly journal Our Corner. Although she was to find her true spiritual home in Theosophy, her earlier biography illustrates the fusion of traditional secular religiosity with the early stages of the Socialist revival.

Raised in an atmosphere of Evangelical piety, and intensely religious as an adolescent, she made a disastrous marriage to a curate, the Reverend Frank Besant. Soon she began to have serious doubts about the validity of her faith. The inevitable and final

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<sup>1</sup>In his notes on Pease's MS of The History of the Fabian Society, against the passage: The 'Religion of Humanity' offered solutions for all the problems that faced us. It suggested a new heaven of a sort and it proposed a new earth ... Few could long endure the absurdities of a made-up theology and a make-believe religion: and the Utopias designed by Comte was as impracticable and unattractive as Utopias generally are," Shaw wrote: "This last is a very rash sentence. All theologies are made-up; all religions are make-believe; and most Utopias are attractive. I should say that the theology and religion offered as new, were really both obsolete; and that the Utopia, unlike most Utopias, was so unattractive that one shuddered at its practicability." (British Library of Political and Economic Science) Shaw appears neither to have read Comte nor to have expressed any interest in Positivism.

<sup>2</sup>She joined the Society in the spring of 1885 as Shaw's protegee.

break with orthodox faith came when she refused to be present during the Eucharist. Dramatically, she separated from her husband and moved to London where she joined a group of Freethinkers and began to make a new life writing skeptical anti-Christian tracts. She soon came to have a high regard for Comte and it was while she was searching for Positivist literature that she came in contact with the National Secular Society, to which, under the spell of Charles Bradlaugh's powerful personality, she devoted her considerable energies.

In 1874-5 she made an extensive study of Comte and expounded his views in a series of articles for the National Reformer.<sup>1</sup> Although she rejected the authority of the Positive Polity, the articles were sympathetic to Comte's ethical doctrines. The short study of Comte's life and work which she produced in addition to the articles revealed her admiration for Comte. She proclaimed Comte "the greatest thinker of the century." She found the Polity "noble in its scope, but childish in its details: grand in its aspirations, but puerile in its petty directives." She also found Comte's scheme "rigid" and "unbending", limiting "freedom of action" and "crushing originality." Nevertheless, she insisted on its noble principle and pure aim.

... we may wisely learn from the mighty brain and loving heart of Auguste Comte much that will help us in our struggles towards a purer and more settled social state; and at least we may strive to realise in our own lives that fair ideal of charity and self-devotion, whose pure lineaments are reflected in every page he wrote, whose

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<sup>1</sup>The articles appeared in 1875.



lustre no time can dim, and whose beauty no enemies can tarnish, round whose grand and loving brow is bound his noble motto: Vivre Pour Autrui.<sup>1</sup>

That she should have been impressed by the ethical doctrine of Positivism is not surprising. Positivism itself stood in the tradition of secular religiosity and it shared with Secularism a common core of social values and beliefs.

For the secular religionist, the religious spirit, indeed the religious experience, itself, no longer able to find expression through traditional theology, found consolation in a humanistic creed and the worship of science. The secular religionists replaced God with humanity, theology with history. Man no longer acted in accordance with the will of God, but rather in accordance with the newly discovered and demonstrable laws of science. In the light of revised views of the cosmos secular religionists proclaimed the reconciliation between religion and science, and restored the apocalyptic vision which traditional theology could no longer sustain.

Positivism and Secularism shared a belief in the continuing increase of man's conscious control over his material and social environment; in the increasing possibility of moral progress; in science as the vehicle of man's regeneration. Indeed, J.M. Robertson, Secularist leader and historian, noted that "if ever two parties existed with something like a common creed it was they (the Positivists) and we."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>A Besant, Auguste Comte: His Philosophy, His Religion and His Sociology (London, n.d.) p. 39.

<sup>2</sup>National Reformer Nov. 16, 1884.



Much of Besant's Secularist writing contains phraseology and references that are characteristic of Positivist teaching. The same year that she read the Cours she confessed that her work was worthwhile and rewarding insofar as it contributed to the "moralization" of those who participated and the creation of a sense of "true fraternity, true brotherhood ... heart to heart, in ... loyal service to the common need, and generous self-sacrifice to the common good."<sup>1</sup> The need for religious fellowship and the impulse to self-sacrifice, were expressed in secularized form, with the service of humanity as its keynote. In her tract, The Gospel of Atheism, which she produced the year following her study of Comte, she proclaimed herself among "the pioneers of progress, who in their zeal to improve the earth have forgotten heaven, and in their zeal for man have forgotten God."<sup>2</sup> She also sought to show that the worship of science could sustain a true religious experience.

As we bow our heads before the laws of the universe ... a strong, calm peace steals over our hearts, a perfect trust in the ultimate triumph of right, a quiet determination to 'make our lives sublime' ... The contemplation of the ideal (- and especially, of the ideal expressed in noble human lives from the past -) is true prayer; it inspires, it strengthens, it enobles. The other part of prayer is work,<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>A. Besant, The True Basis of Morality (1874), quoted in Autobiography (London, 1893), p. 56.

<sup>2</sup>A. Besant, The Gospel of Atheism, (1876) quoted in Autobiography, pp. 151-2.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 152.

Although Besant had rejected the absurdities of Comte's catechism and the authority and rigidity of the Polity, she had a great respect for Comte's personal qualities and his intellectual capabilities. The social beliefs that she espoused were certainly similar to those of Comte. If her debt to Comte was not direct, his influence was important in so far as it served to reinforce her beliefs.

The "keynote" of her life was, as Besant confessed, the religious passion for "active service", "sacrifice" even martyrdom.<sup>1</sup> What she had learned from Secularism and Positivism was carried over to Fabianism. Her inspiration remained essentially religious. Socialism was,

the Gospel of Man's Redemption ... a social union closer than any brotherhood the world has known ... the Golden Age which poets have chanted ... (and) martyrs have died for: ... that new Republic of man, which exists now in our hope and ... faith and shall exist in reality on earth.<sup>2</sup>

As her creed, she declared: "I believe in Man. In man's redeeming power; in man's remoulding energy; in man's approaching triumph through knowledge, love and work."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>A. Besant, Autobiography, p. 57.

<sup>2</sup>A. Besant, Modern Socialism (London 1886) p. 51, "The Co-operative Commonwealth" Our Corner (Sept. 1885), p. 163, and The Evolution of Society (London 1885).

<sup>3</sup>A. Besant, Why I Do Not Believe in God (1887), quoted in Autobiography, p. 146.

Yet, if it was the moral values, the emotional impulse, and the vision of a world transformed, that continued to inspire her activities, her Socialism rested on sounder intellectual supports, which themselves owed much to Positivism. She believed in evolution and progress and accepted Comte's view of the scientific method as the only source of knowledge. Indeed, in this last respect she counted herself a Positivist.

The positive mode of thought puts at once out of court everything which is not reducible to scientific proof; it requires also that all events should be recognised as parts of a changeless order, and as subjected to invariable law, each growing inevitably out of the antecedent condition of things. Every thinker who starts from this basis is a Positivist, whether or not all his speculations coincide with those of the great Positivist teacher, Auguste Comte.<sup>1</sup>

One of Annie Besant's fellow Fabian Essayists, Sydney Olivier, had also been deeply influenced by Comte. Like Besant he had a high regard for Comte's intellectual powers, judging Comte to be "very much the most comprehensive thinker we have had since Aristotle."<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Shaw maintained that Olivier had come to Socialism via Positivism. "He had begun with the Positivist philosophy of Auguste Comte, and was as far as I know, the only Fabian who came in through

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<sup>1</sup>A. Besant, Auguste Comte, Op. Cit. p. 9. Emphasis mine. For her views on evolution and progress Besant was also heavily indebted to Herbert Spencer who was held in high esteem by the National Secular Society.

<sup>2</sup>Olivier to M. Cox, Jan. 22, 1884 in M. Olivier, Sydney Olivier, p. 62.

that gate."<sup>1</sup>

Olivier was the son of an Anglican clergyman of an Evangelical persuasion.<sup>2</sup> He was educated at public school and at Corpus Christi College, Oxford. While at Oxford Olivier left the Christian fold, but as with so many mid-Victorian athesists and agnostics, the Evangelical inheritance remained strong. The impulse to self-sacrifice and the call to duty was secularised.

After coming down from Oxford, Olivier worked at Toynbee Hall and with Miss Toynbee's Sanitary Aid Committee. He came under the influence of Henry George, joining the Land Reform Union in 1883 and working with H.H. Champion and J.L. Joynes on the Christian Socialist. Olivier was also counted among "those who have taken an interest in the work (of the SDF) or were known to be in sympathy with its aim."<sup>3</sup>

It was in these early years of the eighties that Olivier became deeply involved in the Positivist Philosophy and religion of Auguste Comte. For a time he was tutor to Henry Crompton's son. He went frequently to Positivist meetings at Chapel Street to listen to Dr. Congreve. He even studied the Positivist Catechism and was, for a time, impressed by it. In a letter to Wallas he remarked, "The fact is that unless one studies the system (i.e. the Positivist Catechism) one is not competent to discuss it - only what impresses

<sup>1</sup>G.B. Shaw, "Some Impressions," in M. Olivier, Sydney Oliver, p. 9.

<sup>2</sup>N.B. Beesley and Bridges were the sons of Evangelical Ministers. While at Oxford, Congreve was regarded as the rising hope of Evangelicals.

<sup>3</sup>Justice Jan. 19, 1884.

me is that the more one knows of it, the more obvious most of it becomes."<sup>1</sup>

Just prior to joining the Fabian Society, Olivier, together with Sidney Webb, a fellow first Division Clerk at the Colonial Office, and Graham Walls, an old friend from Oxford, studied Comte and discussed Positivism. "... they were ... looking for some form of social organisation which would remedy the deplorable conditions of the time ... The Positivist system seemed then to be a hopeful solution."<sup>2</sup>

Working on the journal the Christian Socialist, becoming increasingly sympathetic to the Democratic Federation, while at the same time involving himself in the study of Positivism, and attending meetings at Chapel Street, Olivier became caught between Socialism and Positivism. He continually debated the respective merits of each and for a time was unable to adopt either position. In Oct. 1883, after listening to Dr. Congreve lecture, Olivier debated what was ultimately most desirable: Comte's ideal capitalist system or a Socialist system of industry. As they were both far off and postulated such an advance in morality, Olivier felt compelled to suspend judgment. However, he concluded that:

... it does appear to me that a great advance in the direction of Socialism must be the next move, if only for the purpose of educating future controllers

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<sup>1</sup>Olivier to Wallas, undated in M. Olivier, Op. Cit. p. 55.



of labour. And on purely economic grounds it seems to me advisable as the only means of organizing production.<sup>1</sup>

Yet only three months later, Olivier felt obliged to defend Comte and to offer apologies for Comte's dogmatism and arrogance.

I think it is fair to say this of Comte, that though he dogmatizes continually with what appears to be offensive arrogance, he never dogmatizes unless he has in some other place of his writings reasoned out his point to his own satisfaction, and his reasonings are very reasonable and wide-viewed.<sup>2</sup>

The tension that Olivier felt at this time between Positivism and Socialism is most clearly expressed in his comments on Hyndman's book the Historical Basis of Socialism. He judged the book to be good and recommended it to Margaret Cox (his future wife). But he also criticized Hyndman in a characteristically Positivist manner.

What he does not do justice to, in my opinion, is the possibilities for good in that system (Capitalism), while he ignores the inevitable evils of a Socialist system, organized without a thorough a revolution in morality as would suffice to obviate the evils of the

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<sup>1</sup>Olivier to Margaret Cox, Oct. 28, 1883, in M. Olivier, Op. Cit., p. 61. On the point of which was ultimately most desirable: "both it seems to me, (are) so far off and postulate such an advance in our morality that one can scarcely judge by reasoning from present materials which would work best, I force myself to suspend judgment."

<sup>2</sup>Olivier to Margaret Cox, Jan 22, 1884, in M. Olivier, Op. Cit., p. 62.

Capitalist system, which if moralised, I am not sure is not economically superior.<sup>1</sup>

The years 1883-1885, when Olivier was travelling in Radical, Positivist and Socialist circles, are crucial for understanding Olivier. These were the formative years when, as he confided to his fiancée, he was trying to "make the most" of his time "for smattering in all ways." He was "full of desire to investigate all forms of religion and thought and feeling."<sup>2</sup>

Olivier found a 'common element' between Positivism and Socialism; an element that made them "the only two conceivable solutions to the problems of Capital and Labour." The common element was their 'social' outlook which stood in opposition to individualism.<sup>3</sup> This bridged the gap between Positivism and Socialism. While Olivier crossed the bridge to Socialism, it was the social, anti-individualistic outlook, common to both doctrines, that remained at the heart of his Socialism.

Socialism, Olivier declared, was "the opposite and antidote to all forms of Individualism" and the "one indispensable part of Socialist teaching" was its doctrine of "the social nature and propensities of man."<sup>4</sup> He insisted that:

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<sup>1</sup>Olivier to M. Cox, Feb. 18, 1886, M. Olivier, Op. Cit., p. 64.

<sup>2</sup>Olivier to M. Cox, Feb. 7, 1884, M. Olivier, Op. Cit., p. 63.

<sup>3</sup>S. Olivier, "John Stuart Mill on Socialism", Today, Nov. 1884, p. 496.

<sup>4</sup>S. Olivier, "Perverse Socialism" Today Aug. 1886, p. 50.

the complete Socialist criticism of our economy is, not that it is capitalistic, but that it is individualistic. Capitalism is (only) one among the many forms of exploitation which are the inevitable outcome of the unchecked individualistic struggle.<sup>1</sup>

It was these beliefs, so infused with the teaching and spirit of Comte that led Olivier to reject what he called the 'perverse socialism' of the SDF and served as the basis of his criticism of J.S. Mill.<sup>2</sup> The teachings of both the SDF and Mill were rooted in individualistic competitive assumptions which Olivier regarded as being inherently unsocialistic. In a series of articles for To-Day Olivier undertook to examine the "results of an uncritical adoption of doctrines understood to be established by" Marx's book Capital. Olivier argued that with the labour theory of value "Marx had provided a weapon of considerable power for the hands of those who believe that they can promote the Social Revolution by appealing to the individualistic motives of the majority." The resultant "perverse socialism" of the SDF was merely anti-capitalistic. Such narrow and negative socialism rested on "disgraceful appeals to the stomach." "How" Olivier asked, "can a Social Revolution be stable, the impulse to which has been individualistic?"<sup>3</sup>

In a later article, a rejoinder to H.H. Champion, a "Champion

<sup>1</sup>S. Olivier, "Perverse Socialism" To-Day Sept. 1886, p. 112.

<sup>2</sup>See below p. 196.

<sup>3</sup>S. Olivier, Perverse Socialism, To-Day Sept. 1886, p. 113.

of the Perverse", Olivier discussed the place of class conflict within Socialist theory. Olivier held that the recognition of class conflict was fundamental to all Socialists. However, he rejected deliberate attempts to inflame class antagonism on grounds that it merely resulted in a barren economic struggle that was at its core the negation of Socialism. He concluded that, "You cannot make the Revolution with the men whom you win by such means."<sup>1</sup>

The essence of Olivier's argument was that mere anti-capitalism was not enough. Co-operative production and distribution might be established, capital and land rents appropriated, privilege abolished, but so long as the motivation remained individualistic "you will result in a state of things no better than the old."<sup>2</sup>

What was needed was a "larger Socialism" which "insists that it is useless to expect the abatement, even of economic evils, by any other revolution than a revolution in economic motive." A motive which Olivier saw as having social inspiration, "the true spirit of co-operation."<sup>3</sup>

The common element between Positivism and Socialism, the element which distinguished them from the old Individualism, was for Olivier, the social spirit; the spirit of brotherhood and co-operation. The

<sup>1</sup>S. Olivier, "A Champion of the Perverse" To-Day Nov. 1886. In an earlier article Olivier had asked "How are Socialists to look for the perfect human religion which alone can make society whole, when they are preaching bitterness, vengeance, and war?" Perverse Socialism, p. 113, Olivier also endorsed Mazzini's teaching that "nothing can supplant the individualist motives for exertion save the new social religion." Ibid., pp. 113-114.

<sup>2</sup>S. Olivier, "Perverse Socialism" p. 113.

<sup>3</sup>S. Olivier, Ibid.

Positivist belief that a growth of 'social feeling' was the remedy for social evils and that the task at hand was to change people's attitudes, values and motives, was incorporated into Olivier's 'larger socialism'. In this respect Shaw was correct when he said that Olivier came to Socialism through the Positivist gate. Olivier carried over much of the ethical doctrine of Comte into Socialism and his early association with Positivism informed his subsequent reasoning on social questions.

For Sidney Webb, like his friend and fellow Fabian, Olivier, Positivism was a way station on the road to Socialism.

Webb came from a lower-middle class family and apart from a year of language study in Switzerland and Germany, he received a standard 'commercial' education. The intellectual atmosphere of Webb's home was a mixture of the Radical politics of his father and the "broad evangelical religious feeling" of his mother, "who took the children to one church or chapel after another in search of an eloquent preacher free from sacerdotalism."<sup>1</sup> However, there is little evidence to suggest that Sidney Webb had a strong religious belief, or that if he did, its loss entailed any great personal anguish.<sup>2</sup> While Webb went through an existential crisis, the crisis

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<sup>1</sup>B. Webb, Our Partnership (Cambridge, 1975), p. 3.

<sup>2</sup>W. Wolfe gives the best account of Webb's Evangelical upbringings. However, I think he over emphasises Evangelicalism as a formative element in Webb's social faith, making the most of rather thin evidence. See From Radicalism to Socialism pp. 185-188.



appears to be much more in the nature of J.S. Mill's,<sup>1</sup> rather than of the earnest Evangelical who could no longer believe. It was the influence of his father that brought Webb to rationalism and free-thought and thence to Positivism and Socialism, rather than the loss of faith and the search for a substitute.

The earliest record of Webb's thinking on philosophical and scientific subjects are his lectures to the Zetetical Society, a radical middle class debating society. In these lectures Webb expresses his enthusiasm for "the new learning of the nineteenth century" - the biological and evolutionary sciences, whose prophets were Spencer, Darwin, Comte and Huxley.<sup>2</sup> He also espoused the creed of altruism, claiming that the self-less service of Humanity was man's highest and noblest cause.<sup>3</sup>

By 1880 Sidney Webb's opinions had been profoundly informed by a lengthy study of Herbert Spencer and J.S. Mill. Webb's earliest lectures are remarkable for their reverence for the scientific philosophy of Herbert Spencer, whom Webb particularly admired as "the first thinker of importance" who had fully assimilated the

<sup>1</sup>In the early eighties Webb struggled with questions of personal belief and values. In the summer of 1885, following a disappointment in love, he wrote to Wallas that although he believed "calm reason" was "highest and best in the world" it had not brought him much happiness. He confided to Wallas that the thought of suicide, though not the "impulse to suicide" has "never been totally absent from my mind for years." He also confessed to Wallas that he was "unsettled" on ethical questions, and "for at least seven years ... a pessimist by profession." Letters to Wallas June 28, 1885, August 6, 17, 1885, PP II.

<sup>2</sup>S. Webb, "The New Learning of the Nineteenth Century", PP VI, 2. c. 1880.

<sup>3</sup>S. Webb, "The Ethics of Existence" PP. VI, 3 and "On Serving God" PP VI, I, both c. 1880.

newest ideas in science and philosophy.<sup>1</sup> Although Webb was undoubtedly familiar with Comte through his study of J.S. Mill,<sup>2</sup> and although it is certain he had earlier moved in English Positivist circles,<sup>3</sup> it is probable that his serious study of Comte did not begin until late 1882, when he joined Olivier and Wallas in reading and discussing Comte's principle works. Although, Webb never fully embraced Comte's doctrines, two papers of 1884 evidence the influence of his study of Positive Philosophy.

Emphasizing the concepts of 'trusteeship' and 'moralization' "The Way Out" and "The Economic Function of the Middle Class"<sup>4</sup> can be fundamentally identified with Comte's ideas regarding social reconstruction. In both papers Webb argued that as simple expediency the Socialists were "on the wrong track", insisting that they would "find it easier to moralize the monopolist than to expropriate him."<sup>5</sup> In "The Economic Function of the Middle Class" he attributed definite functions to the middle and upper classes, particularly with regard to productive entrepreneurial and inventive services. However, since interest and salaries for superior ability arose out of a monopolists "toll upon labour", Webb maintained that these

<sup>1</sup>S. Webb, "The New Learning of the Nineteenth Century,"

<sup>2</sup>In this respect Webb was as Shaw said a "Comtist second-hand thought John Stuart Mill." "Some Impressions," in M. Olivier, *Op. Cit.* p. 9.

<sup>3</sup>Webb delivered lectures at both the Zetetical and Argosy Societies. It is likely that he attended the lectures of Dr. Congreve (Zetetical Society Oct. 26, 1881) and Dr. Bridges (Argosy, May 11, 1882).

<sup>4</sup>Webb, "The Way Out" PP VI, 19. Delivered to the Argosy Society 1884; Fabian Society March 20, 1885. "The Economic Function of The Middle Class" PP VI, 20. Delivered to London Dialectical Society, April 2, 1884; Argosy Society, Feb. 6, 1885; also abridged edition Church Reformer March 1885.

<sup>5</sup>S. Webb, "The Way Out," p. 47 and "The Economic Function of the Middle Class", p. 90.

classes were entitled to extract as a reward only that portion of the national income "as may be equivalent to the service they themselves personally and at the present time render to the world." Any surplus beyond that they were "morally bound" to account for as "stewards and trustees of the community."<sup>1</sup>

The case for the moral education of the monopolistic community steward was put in "The Way Out."<sup>2</sup> As an expedient requiring no new machinery and dealing with "the much smaller numbers of the superior class who are already partly educated and to some extent moralized," the Positivist method of moralizing the monopolistic classes was to be preferred to either Socialist or Anarchist methods of reconstruction.<sup>3</sup>

As well as frequenting London's avante garde debating societies, in 1884 Webb undertook a lecture series on economic and social history for the Sunday Lecture Society, and for the London Workingmen's College. While these lectures display some Positivist tendencies, Webb's main sociological generalizations remained Spencerian. The main attraction of Positivism for Webb continued to be its approach

<sup>1</sup>S. Webb, "The Economic Function of the Middle Class," p. 23.

<sup>2</sup>Webb acknowledged Comte as the author of this scheme. "This plan - which we may call the moralization of the monopolist - was, I think, first clearly laid down by Auguste Comte forty years ago ..." "The Way Out," pp. 36-37.

<sup>3</sup>S. Webb, "The Way Out," pp. 38-39. This lecture and subsequent ones reveal Webb's fundamental misunderstanding of Comte. Webb stressed that the great advantage of Comte's scheme of social reconstruction over those of the Socialists and Anarchists was its practicability. Thus in contrasting Comte's plan with the Anarchist scheme, Webb argued that the former required "for its realization a much smaller advance in morality" for the Anarchists "have to moralize everybody." Webb advanced a similar argument against Socialism. See "Socialism and Economics," Sept. 1885, PP VI, 22. This view was inconsistent with Comte who had believed that everybody but the capitalists were on their way to being moralized.

to social reconstruction.<sup>1</sup>

It is also apparent that when Webb began his long association with the Fabian Society in 1885, he continued to occupy Positivist positions. As an early Fabian, Webb clearly advocated the Positivist method of reconstruction, as in his very first paper to the Society, "The Way Out." In his second paper to the Society, Webb continued the theme of the practical superiority of the 'moralization' scheme over Socialism. The problem with Socialism, Webb explained, was that the advance in public morality required to make it possible would be so great that its social goals would have been attained before the system could be effectively established. "Socialism will only be possible when it is unnecessary."<sup>2</sup> So strong was the criticism of his Positivist sympathies of a later

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<sup>1</sup>W. Wolfe maintains that these lectures indicate a clear break with Spencer, "whose fundamental antimeliorist, ultra-individualistic polemics ... must have offended Webb's moral sensibilities," and an acceptance of Comtean sociology. From Radicalism to Socialism, p. 190; pp. 190-192 in passim. Whilst it is true that Webb approved of Comte's social point of view, and incorporated Comte's notion of cumulative intellectual development, this did not involve a rejection of Spencer. The evidence, including much of that put forward by Wolfe, points inescapably to the fact that Webb's continuing organic evolutionary viewpoint derived from Spencer rather than Comte, since Comte specifically rejected Lamarck's organic development hypothesis and insisted upon the fixity of species and related social evolution to the gradual development of man's social sympathies rather than to any structural or functional changes in the social organism. Spencer's sociology, on the other hand, was based upon Lamarck, such that organisms, both individual and social, underwent structural and functional changes in response to changes in the environment. It is clear that Webb's sociology was Spencerian rather than Comtean, thus: "Society (is) an organism, (it) grows, decays, separate parts grow or decay, new organs or parts arise. All (is) according to natural law: (the) study of this (is) the ultimate science." Lecture notes on "Economic History of Society in England," PP, VI, 17. Also see lecture notes on "The Production of Wealth," And of. J.C. Green, "Biology and Social Theory in the Nineteenth Century: Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer," in M. Clagett, ed., Critical Problems in The History of Science (Madison, 1962), pp. 419-446.

<sup>2</sup>Webb, "Socialism and Economics" hectographed summary, Sept. 1885, PP VI, 22, p. 5.



paper, "The Economics of a Positivist Community," delivered to the Society in Jan. 1886, that Webb was obliged to deny that he was a firm disciple of Comte.<sup>1</sup> Attacked by Podmore, Bland and others, Webb had declared that not only was the Positivist ideal a "noble one" but that he "should be very sorry to be regarded as hostile to it."<sup>2</sup> Webb allied the moralized capitalist to Socialists in so far as both "recognised accumulated capital as a social force." Since the principal difference between moralized and unmoralized capitalists "is in the consumption of wealth," Webb argued that the difference was therefore "a question of ethics" rather than economics. Rent, interest and profits would continue within the Positivist community, but through the stewardship of the moralized monopolist the distribution of income would be more equal.

We must bring home to the monopolist the sense of his trusteeship, and no one needs wait for the millennium - each one can bring it for himself. In this, as in an older faith, the kingdom of God is at hand ...<sup>3</sup>

Curiously, it was while he was under attack for these Positivist views, that Webb first publicly declared himself to be a Socialist.

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<sup>1</sup>S. Webb, "The Economics of a Positivist Community," Practical Socialist, Feb. 1886.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 39.



Perhaps not unsurprisingly, his Socialism was peculiarly confused with Positivism. Webb argued that Positivism and Socialism found common ground in the insistence that private capital must not be employed for private consumption but for "public purposes and the common good."<sup>1</sup> Whilst subscribing to the general soundness of the Positivist position, Webb conceded that since the process of education and moralization was slow "Positivism does not offer a very cheery prospect."<sup>2</sup>

"I am not a Positivist, and am by no means sure that the capitalist can be moralized, and I call myself a Socialist because I am desirous to remove from the capitalist, the temptation to use his capital for his own exclusive ends.

Implicit in this view was a belief that Socialism could better enforce the social and moral duties of the capitalist. Webb did not at this point seek the abolition of the private capitalist; indeed, he maintained, as in earlier lectures that the capitalist had important functions to perform as regards accumulation and enterprise.

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<sup>1</sup> Webb, "The Economics of a Positivist Community," p. 39.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

By the middle of 1886, Webb was still reluctant to draw any clear distinction between Positivism and Socialism. In a paper delivered to the Fabian Society in June 1886, entitled "What Socialism Means: A Call to the Unconverted," Webb opened:

We seek ... to influence convictions, so as to gradually bring about the Social Revolution - a revolution mainly in opinion.<sup>1</sup>

Emphasizing the importance of moralization, Webb insisted that the principles of Socialism were more than merely a scheme of social reform, they were "a faith, a scientific theory and a judgment of morality on the facts of life."<sup>2</sup>

Webb defined the two leading principles of Socialism as, firstly, the interdependence of society, and secondly the right of the workers to receive the full product of their labour free from monopolistic extractions. Using this definition Webb identified three forms of Socialism - Anarchist, Positivist, and Collectivist. Webb stated whilst both Positivists and Collectivists agreed in the need for equality of consumption, the former differed from the latter in that they would leave property relations undisturbed, equality of consumption "being realized chiefly by an advance in public

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<sup>1</sup>S. Webb, "What Socialism Means: A Call to the Unconverted," The Practical Socialist, Vol. I, No. 6, June 1886. p. 89.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 89-90.

morality."<sup>1</sup> At this point, Webb was clearly not prepared to identify himself as a Collectivist, but just as clearly he was disinclined to declare himself a Positivist.

In 1887, Webb largely abandoned Positivism. He retreated from his former positions not because he ceased to believe in the possibility of moral progress, but because he recognised more clearly than before its limitations.

In a paper, "The Economic Basis of Socialism and its Political Programme," Webb criticized Positivism as "Utopian," saying that the "dreams" of Comte (like those of Fourier, Cabet and Godwin) had "become outworn and impossible to us."<sup>2</sup> Comte failed to appreciate that social evolution was continuous; that there was no "perfect and final state." Socialists, however, recognised that evolution was an ongoing process. Consequently, there would never come a moment when it could be said "Socialism is established." "The progress of Socialism" was the "more complete recognition of the principles of social organisation," and "their conscious acceptance as the line of advance upon which social improvement depends."<sup>3</sup>

Webb's attack upon Comte's inability to see beyond a stage of social evolution based on wage labour was bitter. Comte could "foresee no better ideal community than a glorified wage-slavery, with humane

<sup>1</sup> Webb, "What Socialism Means," p. 92.

<sup>2</sup> S. Webb, "The Economic Basis of Socialism and its Political Programme," pp VI, 33, Dec. 1887.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

masters, guided by philosophic priests."<sup>1</sup> Webb now distinguished Socialists from Positivists and advanced Radicals by their recognition of the fact that "the working classes will not be permanently contented with the condition of labouring for wages as their ultimate status."<sup>2</sup> Socialists, Webb insisted, believed that society was in a continual state of evolution. They rejected the Positivist notion of a perfect and final state and went beyond advanced Radicals in recognising that practical programmes of intermediate reforms were "not ends in themselves, not mere stepping stones to the gradual but complete reorganisation of society upon a purely industrial base."<sup>3</sup>

At the beginning of his lecture Webb had said that Socialism was "something more than Christianity or any other ethical system in that it is the incorporation of positive knowledge of sociological developments and the deduction therefrom of concrete principles of social organisation."<sup>4</sup> But positive knowledge, knowledge that came from scientific truth, was ever increasing and expanding. Comte had been mistaken in thinking that there was a final phase in the development of positive science. There was no third and final stage, for society was continually moving on to higher stages of social evolution. Thus positive knowledge of sociological developments led beyond

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<sup>1</sup>S. Webb, "The Economic Basis of Socialism and its Political Programme," PP VI, 33, Dec. 1887.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.



Positivism into Socialism. This is what Webb meant when he said that "the most obvious modern application of Comte's law of the three stages is that Comtism is the metaphysical stage of Collectivism, and Collectivism is the positive stage of Comtism."<sup>1</sup>

In the following year, Webb finally abandoned all belief in the possibility of moral progress as a "cure for the festering evils of social ulceration."<sup>2</sup> In a tract, "The Progress of Socialism" Webb declared:

Of this hope (Christ-like selflessness) I desire to speak with all the respect which so ancient a dream deserves; if it were realised it would, indeed, involve an upset of present property arrangements, compared with which Socialism is a mere trifle, yet, science must perforce declare that the notion of any but the slowest real improvement in general moral habit is absolutely without warrant. Forms of egoism may change, and moral habits vary, but constituted as we are, it seems inevitable for healthy personal development that an at best instructed and unconscious, egoism should preponderate in the individual. It is the business of the community not to lead into temptation this healthy natural feeling, and so to develop its social institutions that individual egoism is necessarily directed so as to promote the well-being of all.<sup>3</sup>

The hope of Socialism lay "in the political power of the workers."<sup>4</sup>

Thus, after frequenting circles where Comte was read and discussed, Sidney Webb was for a time in the early 1880's profoundly

<sup>1</sup>G.B. Shaw wrote that Webb "used to say" this. See "The Illusions of Socialism" in Edward Carpenter (ed), Forecasts of The Coming Century (Manchester, 1897) 153 n.

<sup>2</sup>S. Webb, "The Progress of Socialism," Hampstead Society for the Study of Socialism, Tract, No. 1 (London, 1888), p. 6.

<sup>3</sup>S. Webb, Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>4</sup>S. Webb, Ibid., p. 13.



impressed by his study of Positivist morality, and found in its method of social reconstruction not only a 'hopeful solution' to the social evils of the day, but an advanced position in regard to state intervention and government regulation of the economy. Although many of his subsequent ethical positions retained Positivist overtones, Webb ultimately found the Positivist vision of a new polity of moralized capitalists and wage labourers restrictive as a social and economic theory. The limitations of its aim to the moralization of existing property relations, rather than their replacement, and its emphasis on the growth of social feeling as a remedy for social evils, rather than structural or political reform meant that Positivism was ultimately unable to furnish Webb with a creative, and constructive programme for practical reform.

Beatrice Potter Webb is another example of the impression Positivism had on the Fabian's generation of intellectuals. Of the young men and women who were to join the Fabian Society, it was Beatrice Webb who had the closest association with the leading English Positivists.

Like many of her Fabian colleagues, Beatrice had experienced a crisis of faith and rejected orthodox Christianity. Although she abandoned the attempt to be a Christian, she never abandoned the search for a resolution to the conflict between reason and emotion, science and religion. The nature of the conflict was stated in the first volume of her memoirs as the conflict between "an Ego that affirms and an Ego that Denies." It was a conflict between the belief that there was a science of social organisation comparable to mechanics and chemistry, a science enabling man to forecast and thus control the future and the doubt as to whether the ideals and

ends of social organisation could be given by science itself without religion or faith. Throughout her life Beatrice was plagued by such doubts. In her diaries, her memoirs and even her research, she was given to an open ended speculation about the ends and purposes of life.

Beatrice's religious upbringing was very different from that of the classic nineteenth century religious doubters. During her childhood she came under varied and conflicting influences. The atmosphere of the home she tells us "was peculiarly free thinking." "There was no censorship whether of talk in the family, or of the stream of new books and current periodicals, or of the opinions of the crowd of heterogeneous guests."<sup>1</sup> Her mother "longed for the mystical consolations and moral discipline of religious orthodoxy."<sup>2</sup> Her father, on the other hand, "was never troubled with doubts as to the divine government of the world."<sup>3</sup> An Anglican "he attended Church regularly, took the sacrament and prayed night and morning."<sup>4</sup> However, there was no compulsion for the Potter girls to attend Church. In fact, during the London Season the girls would accompany their father on a Sunday morning stroll through Hyde Park "to discover the most exciting speaker on religious and metaphysical issues," and "would listen with equal zeal to Monsignor Capel or Canon Liddon, Spurgeon or Vosey, James Martineau or Frederic Harrison."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>B. Webb, My Apprenticeship (London, 1971), p. 77.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 39

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 33

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., pp. 76-77.

Apart from her mother and father, there were two others who exercised a formative influence on Beatrice: Martha Jackson, her mother's companion and attendant, a Baptist of fundamentalist persuasion whose "most far-reaching and influential ... gifts was her revelation of the meaning of the religious spirit"<sup>1</sup>; and Herbert Spencer, a close family friend.

As Beatrice remarked:

We lived, indeed, in a perpetual state of ferment, receiving and questioning all contemporary hypotheses as to the duty and destiny of man in this world and the next. Into this all-questioning state of mind were thrust the two most characteristic of current assumptions: first, that physical science could solve all problems; and secondly, that everyone, aided by a few elementary text books, could be his own philosopher and scientist - just as a previous generation had imagined that if only the law were codified into a clearly printed little handbook, every man could be his own lawyer. Living a life of leisure on this battlefield of mixed metaphysic and conflicting ethic, it is not surprising that the first fifteen years of my thinking life were spent, not in learning a craft, but in seeking a creed by the light of which I could live the life I had to lead.<sup>2</sup>

Beatrice wrestled with the problems of Christianity but soon lost her feeble hold on traditional orthodoxy. For a time she turned to a study of Buddhism, but like Christianity that too failed her. In 1876, she thought she "had found a resting place for the soul of man" in Spencer's Religion of Science. But it too she found wanting. It was "bleak and dreary in sorrow and ill health."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>B. Webb, My Apprenticeship, p. 44.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 78.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 115.

It was three years later, when Beatrice was twenty-one, that she read the works of Auguste Comte. As a student Beatrice had familiarized herself with "the writings of the most famous of the English disciples and admirers of Auguste Comte," including George Henry Lewes, J.S. Mill and George Eliot.<sup>1</sup> However, it was not until 1879 that she undertook to read the master himself.

Beatrice's circle of acquaintances and friends included many of the 'advanced' thinkers, consequently her reading was often "directed and supplemented by friendly intercourse with the men and women most concerned with the subject matter of the books." She confessed that she "would (not) have ordered from the London Library all the works of Comte himself ... had it not been for a friendly intercourse with the Frederic Harrisons."<sup>2</sup>

Beatrice has left a memorable description of the autumn of 1879 when her 'pile of books' from the London Library arrived. She and her sister Margaret walked on the Westmorland moors "in a driving mist, with packets of sandwiches and cases of cigarettes bulging out of short and shabby waterproofs ... discussing vigorously their readings from Auguste Comte."<sup>3</sup>

However, Beatrice proved a less apt pupil than the Harrisons had hoped. While able to recall Margaret's criticism of Comte, "how far as a young girl, I agreed with my sister's acid testing of the worship of man I do not recollect."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>B. Webb, My Apprenticeship, p. 159.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 161.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.



Although Beatrice was unclear as to the precise impression left by her reading of Comte, she was emphatic in her statement that as a religion Positivism had no appeal. "Notwithstanding our friendship with the Frederic Harrisons and other leading Comtists, it certainly never occurred to me to join the Church of Humanity."<sup>1</sup> Some years later Beatrice recorded in her diary her impressions of an address given by Frederic Harrison at the Newton Hall. "His address seemed to me forced - a valiant effort to make a religion out of nothing; a pitiful attempt by poor humanity to turn its head round and worship its tail."<sup>2</sup>

It is curious that Beatrice should have been so unimpressed by Comte. As G. Himmelfarb has suggested "implicit in her conflict of Ego's was an enterprise almost of the magnitude of Auguste Comte's."<sup>3</sup> Yet, despite what would appear a favourable predisposition to Positivism, she did not find in the Religion of Humanity the religious inspiration that she sought.

Beatrice's reactions to Positivism were markedly different from the other Fabians. To Beatrice, Positivism presented itself as a religious problem. Her view of Positivism was coloured by her awareness of the existence of the Positivist Church. Giving even partial assent to the doctrines of Comte, she saw as committing herself to a form of 'believing.' Unlike the other Fabians, who

<sup>1</sup>B. Webb, My Apprenticeship, p. 163.

<sup>2</sup>B. Webb, Diary March 10, 1899, pp.

<sup>3</sup>G. Himmelfarb, "The Intellectual in Politics: The Case of The Webbs", Contemporary History, Vol. 6 (3), 1971 p. 5.



adopted the via media of Littre and Mill, Beatrice tended to shy away from what she could have adopted by her scorn for the rest.<sup>1</sup>

Beatrice accepted Positivism only in its very loosest sense of 'glorification of science' and 'service to humanity.' But even in this respect, Beatrice saw Positivism as merely the culmination of the intellectual tendencies that had dominated the mid-Victorian age.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, it was the spirit of Positivism, which Beatrice took to be the Common property of her age, that led her to her choice of craft.

From the flight of emotion away from the service of God to the service of man, and from the current of faith in scientific method, I drew the inference that the most hopeful form of social service was the craft of a social investigator.<sup>3</sup>

It was in Beatrice's craft rather than her creed that positivism had its most decisive bearing. Having failed to inculcate the

<sup>1</sup>Littre, in France, and J.S. Mill, in England, had attempted to distinguish two careers in Comte's life, arguing that Comte's elaborate system of worship was the product of his pathetic love of Clothilde de Vaux and bore no relationship to the serious scientific work of his earlier years. However, the Fabians, perhaps because they were less philosophically sophisticated than Littre or Mill, felt no necessity to deny the unity of Comte's life and doctrine. They simply selected out what they found to be true and useful and ignored the rest. Thus they could accept Positivist ethics and social values without enrolling themselves as members in an instituted Church.

<sup>2</sup>The two tendencies, which made up the elements of what Beatrice called the Time-Spirit were, firstly the "belief in the scientific method, in that intellectual synthesis of observation and experiment, hypothesis and verification by means of which all mundane problems were to be solved," and secondly, "the emotion which, like the warp before the woof, gives strength and direction to the activities of the intellect" (emotion which was transferred from God to man). My Apprenticeship, pp. 146, 158.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 165.

doctrines of Positivism, the English Positivists encouraged Beatrice in her choice of craft and taught her some of the basic techniques of social investigation.

After Beatrice's sentimental journey to Bacup, she joined Octavia Hill and the Barnetts in the work of the Charity Organisation Society and later worked as a rent-collector in the East End of London. However, in the winter of 1885-6, owing to her father's sudden illness, she was temporarily forced to give up work. In the ensuing months Beatrice devoted her energies to study. "Having sampled the method of observation and experiment" Beatrice found what she most "needed was historical background; some knowledge of constitutional law and industrial development, and some acquaintance with past and present political and economic theory."<sup>1</sup> Her reading led her to puzzle over the methodology of social science - "What, for instance, was the right relation of personal observation to statistical inquiry?"<sup>2</sup> The problem was one that was being raised by the first phases of Charles Booth's inquiry into the Life and Labour of the People of London.

Charles Booth, Beatrice's cousin by marriage, was within her close circle of friends. In the months immediately before she began her course of study she had discussed with the Booth's the possibilities of social diagnosis.<sup>3</sup> She was a member of Booth's Board of

<sup>1</sup> My Apprenticeship, p. 289.

<sup>2</sup> B. Webb, My Apprenticeship, p. 291.

<sup>3</sup> B. Webb, Diary Aug. 22, 1885, PP.

Statistical Research and was impressed by the gigantic undertaking of Booth's survey.<sup>1</sup> She lamented the fact that she was not more advanced in the knowledge of previous conditions and expressed the desire to undertake the same sort of work if she were free. The following month she determined to write an article on social diagnosis and borrowed from Booth some volumes of the Statistical Society.<sup>2</sup>

The article on social diagnosis, which Beatrice had thought might be of help to Booth's organisation, was never written. Instead Beatrice turned to developing a train of thought which had arisen out of her study of the political economists; "a notion with regard to the relation of economics to sociology, with a consequent theory of value."<sup>3</sup> By August 1886 she had written a long essay on "The History of English Economics" and by the following spring had written a second, "The Economic Theory of Karl Marx."<sup>4</sup> The result of her work was a growing impatience with the abstract and deductive methods of the political economists. The mistake of the political economists, as Beatrice saw it, was firstly, that they studied political economy to the exclusion of other social institutions where motives other than profit making predominated and secondly that they studied it in an abstract and deductive way, relying on certain assumptions about human behaviour.

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<sup>1</sup>B. Webb, Diary April 17, 1886, PP.

<sup>2</sup>B. Webb, Diary May 4, 1886, PP.

<sup>3</sup>B. Webb, My Apprenticeship, p. 294.

<sup>4</sup>B. Webb, "The History of English Economics," PP VII, 1. "The Economic Theory of Karl Marx," PP, VII, 5.

Ricardo tried to make Political Economy into an abstract method. He took as the ultimate elements with which it has to deal, labour, law, capital - he accepted as axioms of human nature certain generalized facts of one aspect of human nature, the Economic aspect and he tacitly asserted that no other side of it existed.

The economic organism of research is one method of discovering the laws of combination using the human units composing society. It starts from certain indisputable facts of human nature - desire for material things and faculties for obtaining them. The grand mistake of the Ricardian School was that they asserted that these desires and these faculties were present not only in all men but also to the same extent. It is also the grand mistake of the so called scientific socialism of Karl Marx and his followers.<sup>1</sup>

What was needed, Beatrice argued, was a study of the history of social institutions as they actually exist.

What is remarkable about these papers is that Beatrice's criticism of 'abstract economics' is similar to that made by the English followers of Comte. Her conclusion that economic arguments should be treated as a part of sociology was the position taken by the English Positivists.

However, considering her close association with Charles Booth, her conclusions are, perhaps, less surprising. Booth had been influenced by Auguste Comte and had been associated with Dr. Bridges, Prof. Beesly and the Frederic Harrisons. He had been particularly impressed with the criticism of orthodox political economists made by the English Positivists and he "delighted in upsetting generally accepted views, whether the free-trade orthodoxy of Manchester capitalism, at that time in the ascendant, or the out and dried creed of the Marxian

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<sup>1</sup>B. Webb, Diary 18, July 1886, PP.



Socialists."<sup>1</sup> Booth's objections to the methods of the political economists and his insistence on the necessity of empirical observation were stated clearly in his Condition and Occupations of the People of the Tower Hamlets.

The a priori reasoning of political economy, orthodox and unorthodox alike, fails from want of reality. At its base are a series of assumptions very imperfectly connected with the observed facts of life. We need to begin with a true picture of the modern industrial organism ...<sup>2</sup>

Booth's conclusions were remarkably similar to Beatrice's. Considering Beatrice's close association with Booth and her acknowledgment of him as an intellectual advisor, it may safely be affirmed that she had been influenced by the criticisms of 'abstract economics' made by the followers of Comte.

From Booth, whom Beatrice judged to be "the boldest pioneer ... and achiever of the greatest results, in the methodology of the social sciences of the nineteenth century,"<sup>3</sup> she also learned many of the techniques of social investigation. Although, in her study of Comte's doctrines she had been neither an apt nor enthusiastic pupil, she proved both quick and eager in learning positivist methods of social study.

In 1887, she joined Booth as an apprentice researcher on his great survey of The Life and People of London. In that classic and

<sup>1</sup>B. Webb, My Apprenticeship, p. 230.

<sup>2</sup>C. Booth, Condition and Occupations of the People of the Tower Hamlets 1886-87, quoted in My Apprenticeship. p. 233.

<sup>3</sup>B. Webb, My Apprenticeship, p. 254.



monumental survey, Booth carried on the tradition initiated by the Positivists of empirical studies of social conditions. Booth's method of statistical verification of data obtained by observation, his attempt to eliminate bias from his investigation and his effort to render his studies scientific were in accord with Positivist teaching.

Beatrice came to criticize Booth for his "static method" with "limits to its power of discovery." The static method could not discover what had happened in the past, or what was likely to happen in the future.

And even when repeated, these statements of contemporaneous facts, however analogous to one another and photographic they may be, do not reveal the actual processes of birth, growth, decay and death of social institutions existing at the time of each successive generation.<sup>1</sup>

Beatrice recognized what Booth lacked was a theoretical framework. She was convinced the historical method was imperative.

Only by watching the processes of growth and decay during a period of time, can we understand even the contemporary facts of whatever may be their stage of development; and only by such a comprehension of the past and present processes can we get an insight into the means of change.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>B. Webb, My Apprenticeship, pp. 252-3.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 253.

These criticisms of Booth evidence an earlier debt to Spencer. But despite her commitment to the Spencerian theoretical framework and her consequent criticism of Booth, she was indebted to Booth for teaching her the techniques of wholesale interviewing, personal observation and verification of data.

The importance of the Positivists in turning Beatrice away from abstract economics to more concrete, empirical studies has been noted. In addition they suggested to Beatrice various new and fruitful areas of inquiry.

Always looking for encouragement and recognition, Beatrice found Frederic Harrison "eager to appreciate new ideas and encourage unrecognized intellectuals."<sup>1</sup> It was he who first explained to Beatrice "the economic validity of trade unionism and factory legislation."<sup>2</sup> As a young man Harrison had planned a study of working class and labour institutions and he and Beesly had written articles on trade unionism and industrial relations. Harrison's early instruction was reinforced by Beatrice's own study of the Co-operative Movement which led her to the conclusion that

consumers' co-operation, unless tempered by the intervention of the political state through Factory Acts, and by due participation in the management of each enterprise by powerful trade unions, might become an efficient coadjutor of the co-existing capitalist employers in the exploitation of the worker.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>B. Webb. My Apprenticeship, p. 160.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid. p. 385.

As early as 1889 Beatrice determined to make the British trade Union Movement the subject of her next investigation.

Beatrice's projected study of trade unionism became the first investigation of the partnership of Webb and co. Thus they strengthened and extended the pioneering work of the English Positivists.

Having considered the individual intellectual biographies of four Fabians for whom substantial evidence of early association with Positivism exists, some general points can be made.

All four of the Fabians considered Positivism after a consideration of other contemporary systems, particularly those of Spencer and Mill. In each case, with the possible exception of Olivier, the consideration of Positivist ideas was preceded by a period of excitement for scientific ideas, particularly those of the biological sciences. However, it is important to note that the consideration of Marxist ideas coincided with the period of closest association with Positivism.

Each came to Positivism after a conscious rejection of orthodox religion. The crisis of faith was most pronounced for Annie Besant and Beatrice Webb. Although each was attracted by the moral attitudes of Positivism, none, with the possible exception of Olivier, accepted Positivist religious forms.

In each case Positivism was a youthful interest and the period of involvement was relatively short.<sup>1</sup> For Sidney Webb and Olivier between three to four years (1882-1886); for Annie Besant probably no

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<sup>1</sup>They all first read Comte when they were in their twenties. Annie Besant in 1874, age 27; Sydney Olivier read Comte while at Oxford but undertook serious study in 1882, age 23; Sidney Webb in 1882, age 23; Beatrice Webb in 1879, age 21.

more than two years (1874-5); for Beatrice, although she had an early introduction to Positivist ideas her active association lasted for four to five years (1886-1890).

In each case no one became a 'complete' Positivist, nor a declared Positivist.

Familiarity with Positivist ideas seems in the main to have resulted from contact with avante garde middle class debating societies, and frequenting intellectual circles. The discussion of Positivist principles seems to have been directed to other middle class professionals like themselves.

Two of them seriously considered the Positivist method of social reconstruction. This consideration was the most complete in the case of Sidney Webb.

In at least one case, close association with Positivist circles led to an active involvement with the techniques and concerns of social investigation which opened an avenue for important future Fabian interests.

Finally, there was a tendency during the period of close Positivist involvement for Socialist and Positivist principles to be regarded as confluent.

Arising out of the foregoing general points, it will be convenient at this point to discuss them at some length in the context of their intellectual and social background.

New discoveries in science and scholarship precipitated an acute crise de conscience for mid-Victorian believers, particularly for Evangelicals. The findings of biological science and the higher criticism of the Bible gave rise to serious doubts about the validity

of orthodox faith.<sup>1</sup> The abandonment of traditional Christian positions left an acute need for reassurance that all was, or at least ultimately would be, well with the human situation. It is clear that for many of the early Fabians the loss of orthodox religious faith created a need for a surrogate to supply a sense of purpose to life. Beatrice's Webb's emotional and intellectual torment arising out of a loss of orthodox faith is well known from the account in My Apprenticeship. She was forever caught in the conflict between the Ego that Affirmed the "validity of religious mysticism" and the Ego that denied it.<sup>2</sup> The need to find an adequate substitute for the consolation, sense of certainty and meaningfulness of existence which traditional belief had provided are expressed in the well known introduction to My Apprenticeship. "Can there," Beatrice asked

be a science of social organisation in the sense in which we have a science of mechanics or a science of chemistry, enabling us to forecast what will happen, and perhaps to alter the event by taking appropriate action or persuading others to take it? And secondly, assuming that there be, or will be, such a science of society, is man's capacity for scientific discovery the only faculty required for the reorganisation of society according to an ideal? Or do we need religion as well as science, emotional faith as well as intellectual curiosity?<sup>3</sup>

The moral malaise brought on by the collapse of Christian belief, and the search for something that would take its place was

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<sup>1</sup> Darwin at first could not be treated otherwise than as an unambiguous alternative to the Biblical account of creation. The higher criticism of the Bible with its close scrutiny of texts combined with a naturalistic turn of mind tended to discredit belief in miracles as the basis of religious authority.

<sup>2</sup> B. Webb, My Apprenticeship, p. 122.

<sup>3</sup> B. Webb, Introduction to My Apprenticeship (London, 1926).



not peculiar to Beatrice. Graham Wallas had early abandoned orthodox faith, yet much of his life was spent in a search for something to fill the void that was left. A friend re-called after Wallas' death: "You felt that, while he was young, he had lost something that mattered, and had spent his life trying to find a working substitute."<sup>1</sup>

As with Beatrice and Wallas, Olivier abandoned orthodox belief, transferring the impulse to self-subordinating service that had been nurtured in his Evangelical home from God to mankind. Clarke too had been troubled by his loss of faith and sought a substitute to supply a sense of purpose to his actions. He wrote to a friend saying, "I want to know what to believe and what to do and until I get these fundamental bases of spiritual activity, I shall be powerless for good. I shall drift as I have drifted, hither and thither."<sup>2</sup> Annie Besant's self-confessed life long inspiration was a religious passion to sacrifice and service. Even Webb, less given to philosophising or soul-searching than the other Fabians, had confessed himself 'unsettled' on ethical questions.

The 1880's were years of unusual intellectual and moral ferment, and the economic depression meant that it was not only religious but economic certainties which were under attack. Whatever the economic and social basis for the depression and whatever the economic and

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<sup>1</sup>Sir Michael Sadler, The Times, Aug. 13, 1932. See also M.J. Wiener, Between Two Worlds (Oxford, 1971).

<sup>2</sup>Letter June 12, 1882 Davidson Papers. See Peter Weiler, "William Clarke: The Making and Unmaking of a Fabian Socialist", Journal of British Studies, Vol. XIV, No. 1, Nov. 1974, pp. 77-108.

social consequences, there is ample evidence to support the view that the last quarter of the nineteenth century was marked by uncertainty as to Britain's economic position, particularly in its international dimension. The certainties of the world's workshops golden age gave way to a period characterised by doubt and uneasiness and even gloom. The changed perception of Britain's economic position gave rise to preoccupations not only with the problems of structuring future growth, but with the problems of past industrial development, particularly with its social consequences.

The response of the middle class intelligensia was, as the periodicals and books devoted to the great debate on poverty and progress show, dominated by these twin preoccupations. The changed economic circumstances gave rise to a renewed concern with the condition of England, a concern which a plethora of surveys and reports did their best to feed. The picture which emerged from this renewed concern was one of social inequality and injustice, and out of it developed a new consciousness of social distress, and accompanying it a characteristic intellectual's sense of guilt. The social surveys developed within the middle class intelligentsia what Beatrice Webb termed a 'class consciousness of sin.'

The consciousness of sin was a collective or class consciousness; a growing uneasiness, amounting to a conviction, that the industrial organisation, which had yielded rent, interest and profits on a stupendous scale, had failed to provide a decent livelihood and tolerable conditions for a majority of the inhabitants of Great Britain.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>B. Webb, My Apprenticeship, p. 193.

This class consciousness of sin arose out of an awareness that the commercial and industrial middle class had failed to discharge its moral duty; and the new call to duty which heralded the emerging professional middle class involved a new moral imperative of secular Evangelism. Beatrice Webb suggested that "... during the middle decades of the nineteenth century ... in England, the impulse to self-subordinating service was transferred, consciously and overtly, from God to man."<sup>1</sup>

This secular Evangelism which arose out of the decline of mid-Victorian certainties provided the conditions for the success of grand reforming philosophies. For a short period, from about 1882 to 1886, some of the leading Fabians were heavily influenced by one such philosophy, Positivism.

Royden Harrison has already pointed out that "Positivism (with a small 'p') was the most distinctive intellectual tendency in England between 1860 and 1880."<sup>2</sup> The Fabians grew up in the shadow of the great philosophies of history which had been formulated earlier in the nineteenth century. Ambitious and aspiring intellectuals, they moved in circles where the works of Spencer, Mill, and Comte were enthroned. When Positivist influence was at its peak in England:

All the young men (of the eighties) who were interested in progressive thought studied the works of Comte and learned from them the idea of a complete reconstruction

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<sup>1</sup>B. Webb, My Apprenticeship, p. 158.

<sup>2</sup>R. Harrison, Before the Socialists, p. 251.

of the social system. Positivism was then a growing creed, and it was the rise of English Socialism that put a sudden end to its expansion.<sup>1</sup>

It is not surprising then, that in this radical intellectual middle class milieu, the early Fabians would be confronted by the problems of the Positivist philosophy.

The Fabians, Margaret Olivier informs us, turned to Comte because "the Positivist solution seemed to be a hopeful solution."<sup>2</sup> Positivism was appropriate to the social and intellectual climate which surrounded the Fabians. It presented a comprehensive view of the universe, offering consolation to those who had abandoned traditional Christian belief. It offered a prospect of social amelioration and attracted those who shared Comte's belief that the old organisation of society was obsolete and that a new one was required. Finally, Positivist pretensions to a reforming and scientific analysis of history won admiration from a generation intoxicated with the methods and achievements of science.

Positivism's claims that it would resolve the conflict between science and religion; poverty and progress; capital and labour, and its great synthesis, which provided a basis for religious feeling and moral effort and a method of social reconstruction within a scientific framework had a wider appeal than Marxism or Oxford Idealism.

It is important to the understanding of the early Fabians reception of Marxist ideas to remember that it coincided with their

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<sup>1</sup>Edward Pease, "Recent English Socialism", in T. Kirkup, History of Socialism, 5th ed. rev. by E. Pease (London, 1913), p. 375.

<sup>2</sup>M. Olivier, Op. Cit. p. 60.

'positivist' period. Their initial rejection of Marxism, which was never substantially reversed, must be understood against this period in their intellectual development when they were heavily influenced by positive ideas. The coincidence was perhaps crucial.<sup>1</sup>

Much of the Fabian discussion and debate on Marx revolved around the labour theory of value.<sup>2</sup> Shaw has left a memorable description of the 'economic tea-parties' where there were "impassioned disputes as to whether the value of Mrs. Wilson's vases was fixed by the labour socially necessary to produce them."<sup>3</sup> Webb, Olivier and ultimately Shaw<sup>4</sup> regarded the labour theory of value as one of the weakest features of the Marxian system. They preferred to follow Marshall and the American economist F.A. Walker in extending the Ricardian law of rent. With the exception of Clarke, the Fabians agreed with Webb that despite claims to scientific status, Marxian Socialists were not 'scientific investigators'. They had discovered "no new scientific truth either in Economics or in Ethics."<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup>E. Pease says, "I find that my copy of the French edition of Das Kapital is dated 8 Oct. 1883; but I do not think that any of the original Fabians had read the book or had assimilated the ideas at the time the society was founded." Op. Cit. pp. 24-5. However, the leaders of the society and more importantly the converts of the 1880's began a study of Marx early in 1885 when they met as a reading circle at the house of Mrs. Charlotte Wilson. This was after their study of Comte.

<sup>2</sup>G.B. Shaw, Bernard Shaw and Earl Marx - A Symposium 1884-1889 (N.Y., 1930) and "Bluffing the Labour Theory of Value," To-Day Vol. II, No. 66, May 1889. Webb's most thorough criticism of Marx is "Rent, Interest and Wages: Being a Criticism of Karl Marx and a Statement of Economic theory" 1886, PP VII, 4.

<sup>3</sup>Shaw, "Bluffing the Theory of Value"

<sup>4</sup>Shaw had originally supported the labour theory of value but he came to accept the Jevonian theory of value.

<sup>5</sup>S. Webb, "On Economic Method" c. 1885 PP, VI p. 25.



The criticism was twofold. Firstly, that Socialists, properly so called, were "exponents of a new experiment in the great Art of Living".<sup>1</sup> And secondly, that Marx's economic methodology was outdated.<sup>2</sup> Webb understood Marx to have ignored contemporary developments in his theoretical system.<sup>3</sup> He had examined only the acquisitive motives for human behaviour and had overlooked the possibility of the condition of Britain, as revealed in the surveys, being remedied by non-economic motives. Olivier made a similar point when he criticised the Marxism of the SDF. "It is useless to expect the abatement even of economic evils, by any ... revolution other than a revolution in economic motive."<sup>4</sup> For the Fabians, Marx's materialism and emphasis on class conflict seemed misplaced, and the importance of non-economic motives, or the necessity to revolutionise the economic motive was urged.

The Social and ethical ideals which the Fabians valued in Positivism seemed to be lacking in Marx. They saw Marxism as purely destructive Socialism. As Wallas put it: "The Marxists have a formula for revolution, but no formula for afterwards."<sup>5</sup> In much the same vein, Olivier argued, that Capital and the other works of Marx that were accessible to English readers were "merely anti-capitalist polemics." "They did not" he declared "teach socialism."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>S. Webb, "On Economic Method" c. 1885 PP, VI p. 25.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>S. Webb, "On Economic Method" and "Rent, Interest and Wages."

<sup>4</sup>S. Olivier, "Perverse Socialism", pp, 113-114.

<sup>5</sup>Quoted by H.G. Wells, Literary Guide and Rationalist Review, Sept., 1932.

<sup>6</sup>S. Olivier, "Perverse Socialism".

The criticism was not that Marx failed to provide a blue print for the future society, but rather that he had failed to provide a systematic basis for social feeling and moral effort, which was, as the Fabians saw it the sine non qua of a Socialist society.

The Fabians criticism of Marx reflected the influence of Positivist teachings and suggests that they rejected Marx precisely because he appeared to underrate the social and moral values to which Comte attached such importance. It was Comte's demand for a systematic cultivation of social sentiments and for disinterested social dedication that found widespread endorsement. The Religion of Humanity reasserted many traditional Christian values in a secularised form; displaced religiosity could find an outlet in Positivism's social ideals. The Evangelically inspired impulse to self-subordinating service found new expression in the creed of altruism.

But if the Fabians adopted Positivism rather than Marxism because of its moral and ethical appeal which relied upon the growth of social feeling and sense of social responsibility, they were not attracted to the ethical idealism of T.H. Green.

The reason for this is to be found, perhaps, in the Fabian cast of mind; in their mistrust and dislike of metaphysics and in their admiration for science and scientific method. Any reference to metaphysics is characterised by impatience and annoyance. Indeed, their lack of sympathy with Marx was undoubtedly coloured by this

general distaste.<sup>1</sup> In the face of such strong prejudice, the neo-Hegelians of Oxford had little chance of success.

Most of Sidney Webb's colleagues would have agreed that German metaphysicians were "bewildering."<sup>2</sup> Their preference was for rationalism, empiricism and common sense. It was a preference which made them resistant to the teachings of the Oxford Idealists School, despite a social gospel akin to Positivism.<sup>3</sup>

In contrast, Positivism not only asserted the primacy of ethical and social values, but asserted them within the frame-work of a scientific model. Within the climate of 'advanced' opinion, the

<sup>1</sup> Webb remarked that Marx had "no special means of discovering the truth, but only a Teutonic capacity for over-subtle analysis." "Rent, Wages and Interest" p. 9. Similarly, Shaw said that Marxist dialectics were "pseudo-Hegelian jargon that only philosophers could understand." "Early Days" in M. Cole (ed) The Webbs and Their Work (London, 1949), p. 8. The absence in Marx's writings of any direct approach to simple scientific laws of Society, accessible to lay scientists such as the Fabians, out of which the reconstruction of Society could be positivistically fashioned, perhaps underlies much of the Fabian distaste for the complexity of Marx's approach. (For a detailed contrast between the 'scientific' approach of Comte and that of Marx, see P. Thomas "Marx and Science." Political Studies, XXIV, No. 1, 1976, pp. 7-11.)

<sup>2</sup> S. Webb, part of a lecture? Workingmen's College? c. 1883, PP VI, 9.

<sup>3</sup> Wallas and Olivier were at Oxford when the works of Kant Hegel and Green were rising in importance. However, their tutor Thomas Case was an outspoken empiricist and defender of the English tradition of Locke and Mill. When Wallas came down from Oxford in 1881 "He was a partisan of scientific method, a rationalist agnostic, an opponent of all metaphysics." Weiner, p. 13. Nearly fifty years later Wallas remarked, that the introduction of Hegelian philosophy at Oxford had given rise to the saying, "All bad German philosophies when they die, go to Oxford." "Philosophy" written for Reform Club Banquet May 16, 1928, p. 31, G. Wallas Papers, box 12. Beatrice apparently tried to read Green but failed. See E.J. Hobsbawm, Fabianism and the Fabians 1884-1914, PhD Dissertation, Kings College, Cambridge, 1950, Chapter 3, n.21. W. Clarke, who shared with Ritchie the task of lecturing on social problems to the London Ethical Society appears to be the only major Fabian to have taken much interest in the teaching inspired by Green.

Fabians shared with Comte a view of the scientific method as the only source of knowledge, and a belief that only a scientific analysis of history would provide a method for social amelioration and reconstruction. While the Fabians' admiration for science, and their exaltation of the scientific method, did not directly stem from Comte, theirs was a common concern with his.<sup>1</sup>

One of the initial appeals of Positivism involved its ethical character as a secular religion. Comte claimed that with the triumph of sociology the conflicts between science and religion would be reconciled. As men came to understand the human providence that was at work within history, their religious feelings would be redirected from God to humanity. But the scientific synthesis of the Cours was only the preamble to the regeneration and redemption of humanity. Science and philosophy were not to be cultivated for their own sakes but in the service of man. It was through the Religion of Humanity, which Comte formalized into a church with saints, catechism and elaborate rituals that man himself would be redeemed.

While the altruistic creed of the Religion of Humanity provided an attractive outlet for a secular evangelical impulse to self-subordinating service, few of the Fabians could accept the fabricated liturgical and devotional forms of the Positivist Church. As Pease remarked: "Few could long endure the absurdities of a made-up theology

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<sup>1</sup>Positivism as a tendency of mind which incorporates a respect for scientific truth was common to Spencer and Mill. Beatrice had been influenced by Spencer before coming to Comte. Both Webb and Wallas were heavily indebted to Spencer and Mill, prior to their reading of Comte. Annie Besant also owed a debt to Spencer.



and a make-believe religion."<sup>1</sup> Rejecting Comte's bizarre religious forms, it was as professionals that they responded to the call to duty, it was as members of an emerging professional middle class that they accepted, in the moral vacuum left by the collapse of orthodox certainties, the positivist pronouncements of the professionals duty.

The sense that society was disordered and adrift, that its organisation was obsolete and that a new one was required, had been a powerful motivation for Comte's work. It became his preoccupation and major aim to replace disorder with order and bring about the total reconstruction of society. Comte's aim of reorganising society attracted support from young intellectuals who, against the uncertainties of Britain's international economic position, had begun to doubt its capacity for further automatic advance, as well as its ability to cope with the type of attendant social problems which the social investigations of the time revealed. Some of the Fabians professed to find in the Positivist method of social reconstruction a 'hopeful solution' to these problems. As professionals, they were prepared to endorse the Positivist call for the systematic cultivation of social sympathies, and the reorganisation of social institutions on an altruistic basis. If they were unable to accept Comte's specific conclusions, or his method of effecting them, they accepted the basic proposition that conclusions should and could be arrived at.

Accepting Comte's purpose, if not his entire scheme, of social reconstruction, the Fabians approved Comte's attempt to fashion a

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<sup>1</sup>E. Pease, History of the Fabian Society, p. 18.



'scientific' method for accomplishing that purpose. Comte's two central propositions, upon which the validity of his system rested, were the law of the three stages and the classification of the sciences. According to the law of the three stages, the human mind develops through theological interpretations of the world, to metaphysical abstract ones, until it finally arrives at positive or scientific understanding. However, the human mind did not simultaneously progress through the three stages with respect to all knowledge. It progressed through a definite order of the sciences. Biology having reached the final stage, it was the turn of sociology leaving only the task of 'constituting' it along Positivist lines. Although the Fabians did not agree with the manner in which sociology was to be constituted, they were convinced of the necessity of a scientific sociology and applauded Comte's attempt to create one.

Positivism had another important bearing on this ambitious rising intelligentsia. The Positivists, to some degree, anticipated the Fabian experience as intellectuals in politics.

An 'intellegentsia', as derivative from the Russian, refers to those who aspire to independent thought and whose concerns and sympathies identify them with the people.<sup>1</sup> But the Russian intelligentsia were also a distinct social formation, arising out of the meeting of a cultured nobility with men of common birth. The intelligentsia developed independently and in advance of the middle class.

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<sup>1</sup>For the following argument I am greatly indebted to R. Harrison, "Intellectuals in 19th century Politics", Government and Opposition, Vol. I, No. 3, pp. 563-567. A Review of J. Hamburger, "Intellectuals in Politics": John Stuart Mill and the Philosophic Radicals.

In England intellectuals did not emerge as a distinct social stratum until the latter half of the nineteenth century. Thus, the Utilitarians, who as intellectuals in politics were the precursors of the Positivists and the Fabians, did not see themselves as being distinct from the middle class. While they aspired to independent thought and presented themselves as spokesmen of the people, they did not identify themselves as a distinct social formation. Comte was one of the first to identify intellectuals as a distinct social grouping and to discuss their relationship with the proletariat.

In a word it is among the Working Classes that the new philosophers will find their most energetic allies. They are the two extreme terms in the social series as finally constituted; and it is only through their combined action that social regeneration can become a practical possibility. Notwithstanding their difference of position, a difference which indeed is more apparent than real, there are strong affinities between them, both morally and intellectually. Both have the same sense of the real, the same preference for the useful, and the same tendency to subordinate special points to general principles. Morally they resemble each other in generosity of feeling, in wise unconcern for material prospects, and in indifference to worldly grandeur. This at least will be the case as soon as philosophers in the true sense of that word have mixed sufficiently with the nobler elements of the working classes to raise their own character to its proper level. When the sympathies which unite them upon these essential points have had time to show themselves, it will be felt that the philosopher is, under certain aspects, a member of the working class fully trained; while the working man is in many respects a philosopher without training. Both too will look with similar feelings upon the intermediate or capitalist class. As that class is necessarily the possessor of material power, the pecuniary existence of both will as a rule be dependent upon it.<sup>1</sup>

"These affinities (between the philosopher and the proletariat)",

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<sup>1</sup>A. Comte, General View of Positivism, trans J.H. Bridges, (London, 1880), pp. 94-5.

Comte argued, "follow as a natural result from their respective position and functions."<sup>1</sup> A view with which the English followers of Comte concurred in their instinctive reactions to the working class.

It is this stony impenetrability to ideas, of which the British middle class have made a sort of gospel, and in which the aristocratic class (who ought to know better) please to encourage them, that so revolts a man of any cultivation and grain of imagination. Where is such a one to be found, not absolutely absorbed in politics or business, who is not visibly mocking at the whole apparatus (Parliament, Bible, Free Trade) in his heart? A lively writer of this class has opportunely transplanted the German name Philistine. This happily describes that insurrection of the brain against the official and mercantile thrall which has driven those who believe in the force of ideas into closer sympathy with the people.<sup>2</sup>

In their view of the relationship between the intellectual and the working class, the Positivists largely anticipated the Fabians. This emergence of a distinct intellectual class which Positivists saw as characteristic of future developments was, in fact, borne out in the Fabian experience.

Fabianism emerged in Britain when intellectuals began to appear as a distinct social formation. Shaw and Webb called this new stratum the nouvelle couche sociale, the 'intellectual proletariat',

<sup>1</sup>A. Comte, General View of Positivism, trans J.H. Bridges, (London, 1880), pp. 94-5.

<sup>2</sup>F. Harrison, Order and Progress (1875), p. 186.

the 'literary proletariat', the 'blackcoated' or 'professional proletariat.' These were the men of the lesser professions, journalists, writers, civil servants, teachers and artists,<sup>1</sup> who with all the professionals sense of duty answered the positivist call to duty. In the main they occupied the then fairly uncommon position of the salaried middle class. With the growth of a great many new professional openings in journalism and authorship, teaching and public service, these professionals were coming to hold a more stable position within the social system. By origin they came from the well-~~to-do~~ middle class and were the products of the greater public schools and the older universities, but with the growth in secondary education, they were increasingly recruited from below.

The Fabians were intellectuals not only in the sense that they aspired to independent thought and had sympathies which identified them with the people, but also in the sense that they saw themselves as a contingent of the nouvelle couche sociale, a class distinct from the older commercial and industrial middle class.

The development of Fabianism must be seen in the tradition of intellectuals in politics, in the tradition of the intellectual ginger groups which did so much to determine the shape of social thought and legislation in nineteenth century England. They were not as Hobsbawm asserts "anomalies".<sup>2</sup> Nor were they "accidental" parts of the Socialist and labour movements.<sup>3</sup> And while it remains

<sup>1</sup>George Gissing described this new class as a "class of young men distinctive of our time - well educated, fairly bred, but without money." (Quoted in H. Ausubel, In Hard Times; Reformers Among the Late Victorians (N.Y., 1960), p. 96). But with the exceptions like William Clarke and Shaw (in the early years) the disappointment and financial insecurity of Grub Street was not the mark of the nouvelle couche sociale.

<sup>2</sup>E.J. Hobsbawm, "The Fabians Reconsidered" in Labouring Men (London, 1965), p. 256.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 266.



true that "The middle class socialism of the Fabians reflect ... (their) unwillingness or ... inability ... to find a firm place in the middle and upper class structure of late Victorian Britain"<sup>1</sup> this reflected a consciousness of themselves as intellectuals emerging from a tradition to form a new and distinct class with a special role to play in creating and leading a Socialist Commonwealth.

If the Fabians had a strong sense of 'bourgeois' virtue; if their attitudes to the working class was coloured by middle class condescension; if they were unconcerned with creating a mass working class movement; if the rewards to the professional trained expert were great, it was in part due to their view of themselves as a contingent of the nouvelle couche sociale, who would be the directors and servants of the new democracy, responding to an informed sense of a professionals social duty.

The Fabians, like the Positivists before them, envisaged an alliance of the intellectual and the proletariat. They would form with the working class a "union of culture and labour."<sup>2</sup> While their attitude toward the working class at times revealed a middle class disdain, the Fabians respected the organisational capacity of the working class and recognised its privations. They had the intellectuals sense of guilt in regard to the working class, which re-affirmed their sense of duty.

<sup>1</sup>E.J. Hobsbawm, "The Fabians Reconsidered" in Labouring Men (London, 1965), p. 268.

<sup>2</sup>W. Clarke, "The Fabians Society" New England Magazine, p. 99.



The Fabians were enthusiastic about the prospect for democracy. They looked to the enfranchisement of the working class to force, democratically and gradually, socialist measures. But there was always a tension between their belief in democracy and their belief in the need for expert capable government. They saw social and political progress as an intellectually demanding task. What democracy needed was an elite possessing expertise and scientific knowledge of society and an enlightened civic sense. Socialism was to be won not by a class conscious proletariat but by a corpus of trained experts capable of directing and serving a working class electorate.

The importance of the Positivist to the Fabian experience is that the Positivists to some extent anticipated the Fabians in their attitudes and relationship with the working class. Intellectuals, conscious of themselves as such, they thought of themselves as being distinct from the traditional middle class. It was not that the Fabians failed to fit into the traditional Victorian class structure, rather that they saw themselves as being outside it. This sense of being outside the classes gave them the abstemial character which is the hallmark of the intellectual in politics.

Both the Positivists and Fabians at times interested themselves in an independent party of labour, but the leaders eschewed parliamentary careers. What they sought was power without office. Jealous of their intellectual independence, their effectiveness was in their research and propaganda. They sought to influence politics, popularising their principles through literature and journalism, winning the confidence of powerful groups through permeation and promoting legislation through their membership of committees and commissions.

Thus if Fabianism conferred an exalted role upon the intellectual in achieving Socialism, and if it saw intellectuals as among the beneficiaries of Socialism, it was due to the Fabians' sense of themselves as a contingent of the nouvelle couche sociale. It was in this context that they emerged as the successors to the Positivists as intellectuals in politics.

None of the leading Fabians became complete Positivists, although some approached it more closely than others. However, the unwillingness to become full fledged disciples or converts to the Positivist Church was neither a barrier to Positivist influence nor a deterrent to conscious borrowing. Most of them adopted the Littreist via media. They simply selected out what they found to be true or useful and ignored the rest. Thus the Fabians could accept Positivist ethics and social values, finding in them a convenient expression for their displaced religiosity and moralism, without enrolling themselves as members in an instituted church.

If the Fabians were not Positivists in the sense that they were adherents to a school, or members of a Church, they were positivists in the sense of a tendency of mind that respected the scientific method and theories of evolution and progress. They were also positivists in the sense that 'they made the service of man' the leading doctrine of their lives.

That is not to say that all those who believed in the spirit of free inquiry and the methods of empirical science, or those who held a humanitarian outlook, owed a direct debt to Comte. In many cases such beliefs and outlooks were simply conclusions shared with Comte; conclusions that had been arrived at by other roads than Comte. But

even when Comte's Positive Philosophy had not been an original inspiration, his ideas were welcomed, serving to strengthen earlier attitudes.

Comte's scientific approach and his belief in the self-less service to humanity excited widespread interest and won general approval among the Fabians. On its ethical side Fabianism reflected an early involvement with Positivism. Many of the social aims and values of Positivism found a new home in Fabianism. Most of the Fabians were prepared to embellish their early Socialist pronouncements with Positivist morality.

However, there is a danger of over emphasising the early ethical-religious preoccupations of the Fabians. Recent scholars have attempted to revise Fabian history, suggesting that in the early years the Society was more concerned with philosophy and ethics than it has previously thought to have been. An attempt has been made to redress the balance against the older view of Fabianism as narrow and pragmatic, concerned with scientific order and efficiency. Such work, which has been facilitated by access to manuscript collections, is important. But as in any revision of history there is the hidden danger, that in attempting to re-balance the scales, too much weight is put in the other side and the scales tip too heavily the other way.

Many of the Fabians saw Socialism as a call to personal duty and service. For some, Socialism itself was a kind of religious activity. But this does not mean that Fabianism was a brand of ethical Socialism. There was a relationship between the Victorian loss of faith and the Fabian's Positivist period. The social morality of Evangelicalism and Positivism were closely akin and tended to reinforce one another. Positivism was in many ways a secular transposition of the beliefs

and emotional dynamic of Evangelicalism. But it must be remembered that precisely because of the close connection between Evangelicalism and Positivist morality, the language of Positivism was familiar and easy rhetoric. Nor can the audience to whom the Fabians spoke be ignored. Primarily the Fabian message was directed to the middle class intellectual, men and women like themselves who had abandoned orthodox faith but who had reforming zeal with consciences to be aroused. The Fabians could employ Positivist morality to enlist essentially religious emotion in the cause of social reform.

Finally, the historian must remember to separate the personal preoccupations and forces that energize, motivate and sustain individuals, from the work and aims of the Society. That individuals were ethically or religiously inspired must not be allowed to obscure the fact that the essence of Fabianism was institutional.

Herein resides the importance of Positivism to Fabianism. The Fabian Society emerged out of a long "clarifying experience" during which all that was "superfluous and non-essential" was thrown aside.<sup>1</sup> Initially, attracted to Positivism as a secular religion, sympathetic to its aims and social ideals, they soon found it wanting. Positivism's remedy for social evils basically relied on the growth of social feeling and a sense of responsibility to society. Comte insisted that it was impossible to effect any permanent change in social institutions without a previous reorganisation of life and opinion. Social problems

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<sup>1</sup>H. Bland, "The Faith I Hold," p. 228.

were to be solved not through structural or political reform, but through spiritual regeneration. But the appeal for men to change their hearts and minds rests on certain assumptions about man's nature. These assumptions the Fabians were increasingly unwilling to admit. Webb, who had been an outspoken advocate of the Positivist method of social reconstruction, had by 1888 discounted the possibility of a "general recrudescence of a Christlike unselfishness" as a remedy for "festering evils of social ulceration." The workers would be released from " 'the great social evil of the non-labouring class' where monopolies caused the 'taxation of the industrious for the support of indolence, if not plunder' " by their political power.<sup>1</sup> Thus the Fabians after an early involvement with Positivism, came to reject the appeal to moral force. Their appeal was not to man's moral sensibility but to his common sense. They counted not on moral regeneration of man but on the recognition of the rationality and necessity of Socialism. They anticipated the erosion of capitalism under the advance of collectivism, not as a result of moral transformation but as a sensible recognition of the facts of the world.

Along with the increasing unwillingness to admit of the possibility of the kind of moral and spiritual change envisaged by Comte, was the recognition that Positivist remedies were limited. Relying on social and moral, rather than political solutions, it could not provide a coherent body of principles on which to build a party platform or to draft legislation. Indeed, it was a problem that the English Positivists had themselves encountered. When the Fabians

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<sup>1</sup>S. Webb, "The Progress of Socialism", The Hampstead Society for the Study of Socialism Tract No. 1 (London, 1888).



encountered the problem they put aside the larger dream of social regeneration and the building of a new moral world and turning to political and economic solutions, concentrated on the immediate possibilities for reform within the existing system.

The events of the late eighties highlighted the deficiencies of Positivism and helped to complete the conversion of those Fabians who still had Positivist sympathies to Socialism. The unemployed agitation of the spring of 1886, caused the Fabians to seriously consider Socialist political methods. While the Society as a whole took no active part, a few individual Fabians were participants. Bland, summing up their reactions for an article in the Practical Socialist, argued that the hope of political revolution or even great reform arising out of the 'increasing misery' of the working class and a revolt of the unemployed was futile. What was needed Bland continued, was a party which would press for Socialist measures. Socialists, he said, should devote themselves to the task of thinking out a programme for constructive legislation.<sup>1</sup> In 1886, the protracted struggle with the Anarchists came to a head in a public debate, the result of which Fabian leaders claimed was to convince them of "the advisability of setting to work by ordinary political methods and having done with vague exhortations to Emancipate the Workers."<sup>2</sup> This acceptance of 'ordinary political methods' was partly promoted by, and in turn strengthened by, the Societies' attempt to permeate

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<sup>1</sup>H. Bland, "The Socialist Party in Relation to Politics," Practical Socialist, Oct. 1886.

<sup>2</sup>G.B. Shaw, Fabian Tract No. 41; E. Pease, History of the Fabian Society, p. 67, (emphasis mine).

the Liberal and Radical Associations and the Radical Clubs. In 1885 and 1886 with the political annihilation of Dilke and the 'defection' of Chamberlain with the Liberal Unionists, Radicalism lost its leaders and an opportunity was created for the Fabians to attempt to marshall Radicals behind a Socialist-inspired leadership. The failure of the Liberals in London in the elections of 1885 and 1886, encouraged them to think that the tactics of permeation might induce Radicals to accept Socialist ideas and an advanced programme of social reform. The Fabians won their first electoral victory in 1888 when three members of the society were elected to the London School Board. When the London County council was established in the same year they were immediately enthusiastic for its Socialist possibilities.

The Fabian rejection of the Positivist method of social reconstruction was in itself a measure of its importance to their Socialist doctrine, and the ultimate importance to Fabianism of the Positivist scheme was not that the Fabians embraced it for a time, but that they eventually came to realise that the moral appeal was not enough; that what was required was political and structural reform.

Comte's doctrine had been a powerful intellectual influence for the Fabians. Their early involvement with his teachings had been an important part of their long 'clarifying experience.' But of equal importance was their early association with leading English Positivists. The Positivists directed Beatrice Potter along the path of social investigation, teaching her both how and what to study.

Via Booth, Beatrice was influenced by the criticism of abstract economics made by the followers of Auguste Comte. Beatrice in turn exercised an important influence over Sidney.

At the time Sidney made Beatrice's acquaintance, he himself was on the way to abandoning abstract economics in favour of more concrete studies. As Beatrice noted, Sidney's contribution to Fabian Essays had shown his 'historic sense'. His ability and interest in collecting factual information was evident in "Facts for Socialists", "Facts for Londoners." and "The London Programme". However, Beatrice's interests were more academic and defined and the first problems the partnership of Webb investigated were those already begun or projected by Beatrice.

The methods and techniques of social investigation that Beatrice had learned from the Positivists, were to be carried over into their monumental works in historical sociology. Indeed, when the Webbs, in the preface to Industrial Democracy wrote, "Sociology, like all other sciences can advance only upon the basis of a precise observation of actual facts", they were merely reiterating a conclusion that Beatrice had arrived at ten years previously.<sup>1</sup>

While Beatrice did not interest the whole of the Society in the positivist methods of social study, she did alert them to the importance of particular movements. Frederic Harrison had first explained to Beatrice the economic validity of factory legislation and trade unionism. Harrison's early instruction was reinforced by Beatrice's own study of the Co-operative Movement.

Beatrice's 'life-history' of the British Co-operative Movement had made a remarkable impression on Sidney. The occasion of their first meeting, was Beatrice's search for a 'guide' to assist her with the historical background to her projected study of trade unionism. The meeting was important not only as a presage of their future comradeship in work, but because Sidney's acquaintanceship with Beatrice signalled a change in Fabian attitudes toward the Co-operative

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<sup>1</sup>S. and B. Webb, Industrial Democracy (London, 1897) p.v.

and Labour Movements. The Fabian Essays which had been published in 1889 had almost completely ignored trade unionism and co-operation. That the first edition had short comings on these subjects was to be acknowledged by Sidney in the preface to a later edition. Indeed, Beatrice explained that, despite her absorption in political and economic problems, she had "failed to become known to any of the Fabian essayists ... until Jan. 1890" because she "was seeking enlightenment, not from socialist lecturers and theoretical pamphlets, but from an objective study of the Co-operative Movement and of trade-unionism ..."<sup>1</sup>

There were of course other influences making for a change in the Fabian attitude. The Dock Strike of 1889 and the emergence of the New Unionism, not only altered the orientation of the labour movement itself, but caused Socialists to reconsider the significance of trade unionism, both within the labour movement and in political and economic life generally. But undoubtedly, Beatrice's investigations, both accomplished and planned, which owed so much to the English Positivists, were to a considerable extent responsible for bringing to the attention of the Fabian Society the importance of the co-operative and trade union movements.

Finally, the importance of the Positivist experience to the Fabian experience, was that the Positivist served to some extent as a model for the intellectual in politics. The Webbs, in their history of Trade Unionism had stated that it would be difficult to exaggerate the zeal, devotion and service rendered by the Positivist in the labour laws agitation. It was this same zeal, devotion and service that the Fabians hoped to duplicate.

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<sup>1</sup>B. Webb, My Apprenticeship, p. 400.

If the Fabians lacked the humility of the Positivists in relation to the Labour Movement, it was perhaps due to their recognition that the alliance between the intellectual and the proletarian was cemented by a new class interest rather than 'moral and intellectual' affinities. The alliance was not between philosophers as 'members of the working class fully trained' and the working man as a 'philosopher without training' but between the wage earner and the professional proletariat. The Fabians allied themselves with the working class not to triumph over the Philistines but to triumph over the landlord and capitalist. The task of the professional proletariat was not to ally himself with the working class in cultivating men's moral sensibilities and social sympathies but to serve and direct the working class in the intellectually demanding task of achieving Socialism.

H. J. Pirenne, *History of the Fabian Society* (London, 1933), p. 236.

A. H. Hirst, *Labour Socialism and English Politics* (Cambridge, 1934), pp. 247-8. H. J. Pirenne, writing from a different viewpoint, agreed with this conclusion. See, "The Fabian Reconsidered" *Labouring Man* (London, 1935), p. 72.

In August 1892, it changed its name to the Social Democratic Federation.

In the early sixties there was considerable overlap and interchange between the Fabians and the Democratic Federation. Edward Bellamy was a member of the Federation. Edward Shaw, Graham Waller and John Russett were for a time Fabians and "two were listed in Justice" (12 Jan. 1891) as being "those who have taken an interest in the work of the Fabian Society and are now to be its members". Conversely, Lloyd and Thompson appear in the early Fabian lists of members.



## THE FABIAN REACTION TO MARX

The principal general achievement claimed on behalf of the Fabians by the secretary of the Society, E.R. Pease, was that they were able to "break the spell of Marxism in England."<sup>1</sup> It is a claim which A.M. McBriar rightly dismisses as "extravagant, for Marxism had cast no spell over England."<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, the Fabians were proud of their economic theory, which they regarded not only as superior to Marx's but as a major contribution to Socialist thought.

By the early eighties the Democratic Federation<sup>3</sup> was receiving much publicity, and Marx was being read and discussed in Radical and Socialist circles. The Fabians could not long have avoided confronting Marx whether first hand or as relayed, however imperfectly, through Hyndman and the Social Democratic Federation. Indeed, of those who would become the leading Fabians, the majority had some early associations with the Democratic Federation,<sup>4</sup> which by 1883 had adopted a Marxist programme.

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<sup>1</sup>E.R. Pease, History of the Fabian Society (London, 1926), p. 236.

<sup>2</sup>A.M. McBriar, Fabian Socialism and English Politics (Cambridge, 1966), pp. 347-8. E.J. Hobsbawm, writing from a different standpoint, agrees with this conclusion. See, "The Fabians Reconsidered" Labouring Men (London, 1965), p. 251.

<sup>3</sup>In August 1884, it changed its name to the Social Democratic Federation.

<sup>4</sup>In the early eighties there was considerable overlap and interchange between the Fabians and the Democratic Federation. Hubert Bland was a member of the Federation. Bernard Shaw, Graham Wallas and Annie Besant spoke for it. Olivier and Webb were listed in Justice (19 Jan. 1884) as among "those who have taken an interest in the work (of the SDF) or were known to be in sympathy with its aim". Conversely, Joynes and Champion appear in the early Fabian lists of members.

Bernard Shaw had begun his journey to Socialism as a land nationalizer. He read Progress and Poverty and in a flush of enthusiasm joined the Georgian Land Reform Union. For nearly a year he worked with J.L. Joynes and H.H. Champion on its journal, the Christian Socialist. Shaw's acquaintances encouraged him to attend the meetings of the SDF, where early in 1883, he first heard Hyndman speak. Shaw's initial response was to declare his contempt for the Federation and "accuse them of drawing a red herring across the track indicated by Mr. Henry George."<sup>1</sup> Hyndman immediately denounced Shaw as a novice who had no right to venture an opinion on economic subjects until he had mastered Marx. Shaw took up the French translation of the first volume of Capital and emerged from the experience "a furious Socialist."<sup>2</sup>

One doubts whether Shaw's conversion to Marxism was quite so cataclysmic as his own account suggests, for his command of French was limited. This, combined with the curious habit of reading it alongside the score of Wagner's Tristan and Isolde, makes it seem doubtful that he read Capital with any degree of thoroughness. Indeed, his indebtedness to Capital appeared limited to the elaboration, in the first chapter, of the principle that commodities naturally exchange in exact proportion to the quantities of socially necessary labour time embodied in them.

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<sup>1</sup>G.B. Shaw, "The New Politics; From Lassalle to the Fabians", Fabian Society lecture, Dec. 20, 1889, in L. Crompton (ed), The Road to Equality: Ten Unpublished Lectures and Essays by Bernard Shaw (Boston, 1971), p. 84.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid. Shaw says "I was recommended to read Capital by our friend Mr. Robert Banner." Banner is another example of the kind of interchange that took place between socialist groups. Originally a member of the SDF, he joined the Fabian Society in the early nineties.

It was a discussion of the labour theory of value, which Shaw, at first, defended, but which Webb and Olivier regarded as the most vulnerable feature of Marxian analysis, that stimulated criticism of Marx and initiated the working out of the distinctively Fabian economic position.

In the winter of 1884-5, a group of Fabians established an informal reading circle<sup>1</sup> and invited other Radicals and Socialists to join them to study and discuss the first volume of Capital.<sup>2</sup> The group which called itself the Hampstead Historic Club congregated at the house of Mrs. Charlotte Wilson. Amongst the group were the future Fabian luminaries, Shaw, Webb,<sup>3</sup> Wallas, and Olivier,<sup>4</sup> the economists F.Y. Edgeworth and Phillip Wicksteed, and the Marxist partisans Belfort Bax and H.M. Hyndman.

<sup>1</sup>The Hampstead Historic Club opened in the autumn of 1884 and was voluntarily broken up in the summer of 1889. It originated, according to Shaw, out of a growing sense of intellectual inadequacy among some Fabians. "The mischief was not that our generalizations were unsound but that we had no detailed knowledge of the content of them. We had borrowed them ready made as articles of faith and when opponents like Charles Bradlaugh asked us for details we sneered at the demand without being in the least able to comply with it." G.B. Shaw, "The Fabian Society: Its Early History," Tract No. 41, 1892, p. 16.

<sup>2</sup>Only the first volume of Capital was read and discussed at the Club. In 1885, Shaw with Webb's help began the second volume. However, Shaw never got very far. "I have begun to teach German to G.B. Shaw, the embryo novelist. He knows 'and' and 'the' only. We began Marx, Kapital, Volume two - not the easiest of books - (and) read two pages in two hours, accompanying each word with a philological dictionary." PP, pt. 2, Webb to S. Olivier 7 July, 1885. Webb most certainly read volume two. In "Rent, Interest and Wages: Being a Criticism of Karl Marx and a Statement of Economic Theory" 1886, PP. VII, 4, both volumes are noted. Volume three was not published until 1894 and there is no evidence that any of the Fabians read it.

<sup>3</sup>Shaw had earlier induced Webb to read Capital. Shaw claimed that Webb read the first volume in an hour. With more credibility Shaw said Webb's comment upon reading Capital was "Scotland stands where it did." Shaw, "Early Days," M. Cole (ed.), The Webbs and Their Work, (London, 1949), p. 6.

<sup>4</sup>Olivier had already read Hyndman's Historical Basis of Socialism.

Both Shaw and Wallas have left descriptions of 'Mrs. Wilson's economic tea parties' where Capital was read aloud from the French translation. Wallas reported that "We expected to agree with Marx, but found ourselves from the beginning criticizing him ..." <sup>1</sup> The first chapters of Capital - on which they concentrated their attention - were "of extraordinary efficacy in setting us by the ears" so that the company usually fell to disputation before the reader for the evening "had gone far enough to feel seriously fatigued." <sup>2</sup>

The controversy revolved around Marx's labour theory of value. Shaw recounted,

the impassioned disputes as to whether the value of Mrs. Wilson's vases was fixed by the labour socially necessary to produce them, by the cost of production on the margin of cultivation, or by the 'final utility' of the existing stock of vases ... F.Y. Edgeworth as a Jevonian, and Sidney Webb as a Stuart Millite, fought the Marxian value theory tooth and nail; whilst Belfort Bax and I, in a spirit of transcendent Marxism, held the fort recklessly, and laughed at Mill and Jevons. The rest kept an open mind and skirmished on either side as they felt moved. <sup>3</sup>

The controversy, Wallas said, finally,

led us to abandon 'abstract labour' as the basis of value, and to adopt Jevons' conception of value as fixed by the point where 'marginal effort' coincided with 'marginal utility.' <sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>G. Wallas, Men and Ideas (London, 1940), p. 103.

<sup>2</sup>G.B. Shaw, "Bluffing the Value Theory", To-Day May 1889. This and other important Shaw articles on Marxism from the 1880's were republished in R.W. Ellis (ed.), Bernard Shaw and Karl Marx: Symposium, 1884-1889 (N.Y., 1930)

<sup>3</sup>Shaw, "Bluffing the Value Theory".

<sup>4</sup>G. Wallas, Men and Ideas, p. 104.



For Shaw this debate, which was continued at the Hampstead Historic Club, began earlier in a journalistic encounter with the Rev. P.H. Wicksteed, a Unitarian minister and exponent of the marginal utility theory of Stanley Jevons.<sup>1</sup> In 1884, Wicksteed had contributed an article to the socialist journal To-Day, in which he had criticized Marx's labour theory of value.<sup>2</sup> He argued that Marx had fallen into error when he made abstract human labour the sole determinant of value. Wicksteed contended that for goods to have equal value in exchange they must have the power of satisfying human desires, i.e. abstract utility. It was not Wicksteed maintained, upon the amount of labour, but upon abstract utility "that exchange value is always immediately dependent."<sup>3</sup> In accordance with Jevonian theory, he suggested by the 'law of indifference,' "the abstract utility of the last available increment of any commodity determines the ratio of exchange of the whole of it."<sup>4</sup> Thus Wicksteed claimed:

a theory of value which is equally applicable to things that can, and things that cannot, be multiplied by labour, which is equally applicable to market and normal values, which moves with perfect ease amongst the bourgeois categories ... and fits all the complicated phenomena of our commercial societies.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Stanley Jevons had originally worked out the marginal utility theory of value ("Notice of a General Mathematical Theory of Political Economy," 1862; Theory of Political Economy, 1871). The marginal utility principle was also formulated in Vienna by Carl Menger (Grundsätze der Volkswirtschaftslehre, 1871).

<sup>2</sup>P. Wicksteed, "'Das Kapital' - A Criticism," To-Day, Oct. 1884.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>P.H. Wicksteed, "Das Kapital - A Criticism," To-Day, Oct., 1884. Reprinted in Ellis.



Shaw was drawn into controversy with Wicksteed, writing a reply in the Jan. 1885 edition of To-Day, which was as much an attack on the Jevonian theory (which Wicksteed put forward) as a defence of Marx's labour theory of value.<sup>1</sup> In the course of the next two years, however, Shaw's attitude towards the Jevonian theory underwent a marked change. In the intervening period Shaw attended an economic discussion group tutored by Wicksteed.<sup>2</sup> Subsequent to these discussions Shaw declared his adherence to the Jevonian theory of value. His conversion was without reservation. "The Marxian steel," he said, "was always snapping in my hand. The Jevonian steel held and kept its edge, and fitted itself to every emergency."<sup>3</sup> Thus two years after his public debate with Wicksteed in a review of Capital for the National Reformer, Shaw criticized Marx from a Jevonian point of view.<sup>4</sup>

Because of the fact that the economic essay in Fabian Essays (written by Shaw) embodied the Jevonian theory, it is generally assumed that the Fabians accepted the Jevonian theory of value.<sup>5</sup> While the evidence adduced has in the main been taken from Shaw, there is other evidence to support the broad generalization that the Fabians accepted the Jevonian theory of value.

<sup>1</sup>G.B. Shaw, "The Jevonian Criticism of Marx: A Comment on the Rev. P.H. Wicksteed's Article," To-Day, Jan., 1885. Reprinted in Ellis.

<sup>2</sup>The group, which later became the Royal Economic Society, met at the house of the Stockbroker Beeton. Wallas was also a member of the circle.

<sup>3</sup>A. Henderson, Bernard Shaw, Playboy and Prophet (N.Y., 1932), p. 225.

<sup>4</sup>G.B. Shaw, "Karl Marx and Das Kapital," The National Reformer, 7, 14, 21, Aug., 1887. Reprinted in Ellis.

<sup>5</sup>See Shaw's essay "Economic," Fabian Essays, Shaw said: "the abstract economics of the Fabian Essays are, as regards value, the economics of Jevons." Appendix to Pease, Op. Cit., p. 276.

Annie Besant was the first to adopt the new doctrine. In her pamphlet Modern Socialism, which appeared in 1886, she declared, "Marx's 'value' is a metaphysical abstraction corresponding to nothing existing at the present time, however true it would be under ideal conditions." What determined value, Besant insisted, was "relative utility."<sup>1</sup>

Graham Wallas was also impressed by the Jevonian theory of value. However, Wallas' retrospective claim that the discussions at the Hampstead Historic Club led him to abandon Marx's theory for Jevons' appears to be exaggerated, his adherence to Jevons never being as whole hearted as Shaw's.<sup>2</sup> Shaw's comment that Wallas' contribution to the value debt was a suggestion that Marx and Jevons were both right, is a more accurate assessment of Wallas' position.<sup>3</sup>

In March 1889, Wallas wrote an article "An Economic Eirenicon" which was at once a review of Wicksteed's An Alphabet of Economic Science and a statement of his own opinions on the points at issue. Marx's conception of value and Jevons' were, Wallas argued, not necessarily inconsistent.

It seems to me ... that Marx's essential proposition is in no way inconsistent with that of Jevons and Mr. Wicksteed. Marx, I repeat, states that the ratio of exchange between commodities varies with (or in Mr. Wicksteed's language 'is a function of') the amount

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<sup>1</sup>A. Besant, Modern Socialism (London, 1886), p. 20.

<sup>2</sup>For Wallas' claim see G. Wallas, Men and Ideas, p. 104.

<sup>3</sup>For Shaw's comment on Wallas see "Bluffing the Value Theory," To-Day, May, 1889. Reprinted in Ellis, Op. Cit. In the article Shaw gives a description of the early debates, both those conducted in To-Day and those at the Hampstead Historic.

of labour necessary, on the average to produce either of them ... Wicksteed states that it is also a function of the amount of each commodity already possessed by the parties to the exchange. Each, grants, I conceive, the truth of the other's proposition but attaches more importance to his own.<sup>1</sup>

Wallas pointed out that the 'ratio of exchange' had both a demand and supply side to it and that Marx, assuming demand had emphasized the supply side, while Jevons and Wicksteed, assuming supply, had fixed their attention on the demand side. He suggested that the ambiguous term 'value' might be replaced by economists, as "plenty of terms exist for the various meanings which have been attached to 'value' - such as 'rates of exchange', 'normal rates of exchange', 'total utility', 'final utility' ... 'labour cost', and 'normal labour cost.'" <sup>2</sup> Although Wallas was convinced that "the great 'value' controversy can really be resolved into the fact that Marx and Jevons are using the same word in different senses, and expound different but quite consistent laws", he did suggest that because of its clarity the Jevonian theory might prove more useful.<sup>3</sup>

Sidney Webb was also deeply involved in the value controversy and appears to have been influenced by the new doctrine. At the Hampstead Historic Club Webb upheld Mill's theory of value fighting "the Marxian

<sup>1</sup>G. Wallas, "An Economic Eirenicon", To-Day March 1889.

<sup>2</sup>G. Wallas, "An Economic Eirenicon".

<sup>3</sup>Ibid. Wallas said that Jevons had an advantage over Marx in using mathematics rather than Hegelian dialectics. He also said that Jevons' law of the ratio of exchange was "incomparably better than Marx's, since it is absolutely true without the use of qualifying words like 'average', 'socially necessary', etc."

theory tooth and nail."<sup>1</sup> However, in his essays on economics that were written between 1886 (a year after the debates at the Hampstead Historic Club began), and 1899, there is evidence to support the view that Webb changed from Mill's theory of value to Jevons'.<sup>2</sup>

In January 1886, Webb delivered a lecture on "The Distribution of Wealth" in which he set forth a simple cost of production theory of value.<sup>3</sup> Later that year Webb wrote a long essay entitled "Rent, Interest and Wages: Being a criticism of Karl Marx and a Statement of Economic Theory."<sup>4</sup> In this essay Webb not only criticized the Marxian theory of value but also expounded the marginal utility theory of value. He argued:

He (man) is ... moved to perform them (efforts and sacrifices) by his desire for the product, which is therefore always a 'commodity', that is something or service possessing 'utility' for him. Commodities may vary in utility, not only according to the kind of want which they satisfy, but also according to the degree to which that want has already been satisfied,

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<sup>1</sup>G.B. Shaw, "Bluffing the Value Theory". Mill's theory of value was a cost of production theory.

<sup>2</sup>See Webb "Rent, Interest and Wages: Being a Criticism of Karl Marx and a Statement of Economic Theory" 1886, PP VII, 4; "The Factors of National Wealth" c. early 1889, PP VI, 39; "On the Relation Between Wages and the Remainder of the Economic Product" a paper read to the British Association meeting Newcastle 16 Sept. 1889, PP VI, 41. McBriar states that Webb's "writings do not appear to touch on the most fundamental aspects of the value question, and what he has to say in them would not be inconsistent with a mere restatement of the Millite value theory in the light of marginalist refinements." p. 34. Unfortunately, McBriar did not have access to the Passfield Papers. Webb's unpublished papers reveal that he was more involved in the value controversy than McBriar realized.

<sup>3</sup>Leaflet announcing series of lectures by S. Webb on "The Distribution of Wealth" Jan. 1886, PP VI, 27. Notebook for lecture on "The Distribution of Wealth" PP VI, 23b.

<sup>4</sup>S. Webb, "Rent, Interest and Wages".



further supplies possessing less and less utility.<sup>1</sup>

"This 'law of diminishing returns of utility from commodities'" which Jevons had stated "fully and explicitly", was, Webb declared, "the fundamental basis of differentiation in wealth-production."<sup>2</sup>

William Clarke was an exception to the general rule in being unimpressed by Jevonian doctrine.<sup>3</sup> While Clarke was a member of the Fabian dominated Hampstead Historic Club, there is no evidence to suggest that he took an active part in the debates that were conducted there. But whatever his position at the Hampstead Historic Club, it is clear that by the mid-eighties Clarke accepted more of the Marxian economic analysis than did any other Fabian. In 1887, by which time most of the Fabians had accepted the Jevonian theory, Clarke remained an adherent of Marx's labour theory of value. Writing to a friend Clarke said: "I do not intend to subscribe to the whole of Marx, but I do contend that this general analysis of value and his explanation of the economic development are true in general."<sup>4</sup> There is no evidence that Clarke, so long as he remained a Socialist, ever retreated from that position.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup>S. Webb, "Rent, Interest and Wages", p. 23. Webb noted later, "It should be further added that the utility of the commodity produced in no sense depends upon the amount of labour involved in its production." p. 24.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 26, 24.

<sup>3</sup>The best and most recent study of Clarke is Peter Weiler, "The Making and Unmaking of a Fabian Socialist," Journal of British Studies, Vol. XIV, No. 1 Nov., 1974, pp. 77-108.

<sup>4</sup>Clarke to Salter, Dec. 1, 1887, Lloyd Papers, quoted in Weiler

<sup>5</sup>Clarke resigned from the Fabian Society in June, 1897. The following year he wrote to H.D. Lloyd, "I never was a Socialist in the sense of Marx, and I am not at all a Socialist now." March 28, 1898, Lloyd Papers, quoted in Weiler.



However, the real importance of the value controversy was its bearing on the theory of surplus value. Wicksteed claimed, that his criticism of the labour theory of value had undermined the very foundation of the Marxian theoretical structure. His first notice for To-Day had, in fact, ended with an attack on Marx's theory of value. If, Wicksteed had argued, it could be shown that the value of labour-force is not determined by the amount of labour required to produce it, then,

Marx has thus failed to indicate any imminent law of capitalist production by which a man who purchases labour-force at its value will extract from its consumption a surplus-value.<sup>1</sup>

Wicksteed reiterated this point in his second article.

Only a single word in conclusion, on the importance of this controversy. It is not a mere question of abstract reasoning (although, if it were, that could hardly be urged in its disparagement by an admirer of Marx). It affects the whole system of economics, and more particularly Marx's economics. In admitted contradiction to apparent facts, and without (at present) any attempt to remove the apparent contradiction, Marx by sheer logic attempts to force us into the admission that 'profits', 'interest', and 'rent' must have their origin in the 'surplus value' that results from purchasing 'labour-force' at its value and selling wares at their value. The key-stone of the arch is the theory of value adopted by Marx, and I have tried to show that it is not sound ...<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>P. Wicksteed, "'Das Kapital' - A Criticism,"

<sup>2</sup>P.H. Wicksteed, "The Jevonian Criticism of Marx, A Rejoinder", To-day April, 1885.

As A.M. McBriar has pointed out "Wicksteed's criticism raised the question of whether the theory of surplus value was necessarily dependent upon the labour theory of value".<sup>1</sup> For Socialists like Shaw, who had begun with a sympathy for Marx, this was a serious problem. If they wished to show that capitalism was a system of exploitation they were bound to hold some theory of surplus value. When Wicksteed attacked the most important and influential socialist theory of capitalist exploitation they were confronted with major intellectual difficulties.

Those like Webb, who had been hostile to Marx from the outset and whose commitment to Socialism was not yet firm, were in similar difficulties. Although they might not be Socialists, they were vigorous critics of the existing capitalist system. They wished to demonstrate that wealth was inequitably distributed and that many incomes existed that were not rightly earned.

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<sup>1</sup>A.M. McBriar, Op. Cit. p. 31. McBriar continued, "... as Socialists, all the Fabian leaders wished to preserve some kind of theory of 'surplus value', for they realised that Socialists are bound to attempt to show that even the ideal capitalist society is unjust as part of their argument that the remedy for the ills of existing society lies in moving away from it rather than towards it." p. 33 W. Wolfe maintains that McBriar ... however, misses the point ... in suggesting that Webb's theory of rent was intended to show that 'even an ideal capitalist society is unjust'. That was more nearly the argument of Shaw and the SDF, whereas Webb's intention was to show how capitalism could be made ideally just through 'socialistic' reforms and the concurrent growth of 'social feeling.'" From Radicalism to Socialism (New Haven and London, 1975), p. 203, n. 50. The difficulty is that McBriar and Wolfe are referring to two different periods in the development of Webb's thought. McBriar was referring to the period 1886-88, the height of the discussion of the question of surplus value, when Webb cast aside his earlier Positivism for Socialism. Writing without the benefit of the Passfield Papers, McBriar concentrated on Webb's article of 1888, which indeed is the most systematic exposition of Fabian thought on the subject of rent. The fact of the matter is that when Webb began to develop the theory of rent in 1884 it was in terms of equality of income distribution. He advocated the Positivist scheme for making capitalism more just and equal. However, between 1886-88 after Webb had declared himself a Socialist the theory of rent is more fully developed into a theory of surplus value in the manner McBriar describes. See below pp. 123 ff.

The two groups were in almost identical positions. The solution was found in elaborating an entirely distinct notion of capitalist exploitation, a radical theory of rent.

The Fabians argued as some modern theorists have that the labour theory of value was not necessary to demonstrate the existence of surplus value and that adherence to a labour theory of value was not a necessary condition for a coherent theory of exploitation.<sup>1</sup> Property incomes can be seen as a fact of any capitalist economy. However, it is possible to explain them in different ways. The explanation adopted by the Fabians, which was the one favoured by the neo-classical economists, was in terms of the productive contribution of non-labour factors of production, particularly land, capital and ability. When the Fabians developed their theory of rent it appeared as an alternative explanation of surplus value.<sup>2</sup>

The Fabian theory of rent was considered by its originators to be a fundamental contribution to Socialist thought. In the 1920 edition of Fabian Essays Webb stated:

It is perhaps significant that the part of the book which comes most triumphantly through the ordeal of such an examination (i.e. the light of thirty years experience) is, throughout, the economic analysis ...

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<sup>1</sup>For a modern argument on these lines see M.C. Howard and J.E. King, The Political Economy of Marx (Thetford, Norfolk, 1975), pp. 160-66.

<sup>2</sup>The fullest discussions of the Fabian theory of rent are McBriar, Op. Cit. pp. 36-40, and, more recently, D.M. Ricci, "Fabian Socialism: The Theory of Rent as Exploitation", Journal of British Studies 9 Nov., 1969, pp. 105-121.

Tested by a whole generation of further experience and criticism, I conclude that, in 1889, we knew our Political Economy, and that our Political Economy was sound.<sup>1</sup>

Both Wallas and Shaw referred, in later years, to the importance of the theory of rent,<sup>2</sup> while the Webb's called it "the very cornerstone of collective activity."<sup>3</sup>

The publications which put forward the theory of rent date from 1888.<sup>4</sup> However, there is evidence that the theory was formulated before this time. The theory was discussed both in the Hampstead circle and the Society itself in 1886. Webb, who is generally credited with working out the theory and "putting it into strict academic form"<sup>6</sup> was beginning to develop the theory of economic rent as early as 1884.

In the early eighties, Webb had begun a study of 'abstract economics'. He was familiar with Mill, Cairnes and Ricardo. He was impressed by Mill's notion of 'unearned increment', by Cairnes

<sup>1</sup>Preface to 1920 edition of Fabian Essays.

<sup>2</sup>See Wallas, Men and Ideas, p. 104; Shaw, Everybody's Political What's What (London, 1944) p. 22.

<sup>3</sup>S. and B. Webb, History of Trade Unionism (London, 1920) p. 162.

<sup>4</sup>The principle one is Webb's article "The Rate of Interest and the Laws of Distribution" Quarterly Journal of Economics Jan. 1888. Also see Olivier's Capital and Land Tract No. 7, 1888. Facts for Socialists Tract No. 5, 1887 gives indication that the theory has been formulated but does not elaborate it.

<sup>5</sup>Wallas said the theory was worked out at the Hampstead Historic. Men and Ideas, p. 104. Olivier led a discussion on the subject at a meeting of the Society 19 Nov., 1886. Practical Socialist Vol. 1, No. 12, Dec. 1886.

<sup>6</sup>Shaw, Appendix to Pease, Op. Cit., p. 276.



denunciation of the idle consumers of rent and interest and by the Ricardian law of differential rent, particularly as elaborated by Marshall and Walker.<sup>1</sup>

The lectures which Webb delivered in 1884-5 indicated his interest in economics and his preoccupation with the problems of poverty and inequality in relation to income distribution.<sup>2</sup> The explanation of how the distribution of wealth was actually effected lay, Webb argued, in the "operation of those economic laws which involve the existence of monopoly values for scarce and desirable things, resulting in rent, interest and the exceptional wages of special ability."<sup>3</sup>

Webb argued that society, rather than any individual, was the appropriate beneficiary of rent on land, interest on capital and the remuneration to exceptional skill or ability. His objective was to reduce the amount of rent, interest and wages of superintendence that was received by the upper and middle classes and "devote it to purposes of public utility."<sup>4</sup> In 1884-5 Webb thought that this could be achieved by a process of voluntary moralization. However, the implications of his argument were more far reaching than he recognised.

<sup>1</sup>The German socialist economist Johann Karl Rodbertus who died in 1875, had also extended Ricardo's concept of rent. There are certain similarities between the extension of the rent concept by Rodbertus and the Fabian extension of it. Although Edward Conner's The Social Philosophy of Rodbertus did not appear until 1899, Webb was familiar with him in 1884 ("On Economic Method" ) Webb's comment on Rodbertus was critical, and it would seem that Webb was familiar with him only as a 'name'. There are no other references to Rodbertus in Fabian writings.

<sup>2</sup>See "The Way Out" PP VI, 19 and "The Economic Function of the Middle Class" PP VI, 20.

<sup>3</sup>S. Webb, "The Way Out"

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.



Ths seeds of the theory of rent which began to germinate in 1884 came to their full development between 1886-88. The first outline of the theory was put forward in January 1886.<sup>1</sup> Two years later, in January 1888, it appeared in its final form.<sup>2</sup>

Undoubtedly the debates at the Hampstead Historic induced Webb to elaborate his earlier ideas and to attempt to create a new theory of surplus value by an extension of the Ricardian theory of rent. Wallas said that the Ricardian law of rent had been a focal point of their disagreement with Marx.

Instead of taking surplus value in the lump, we divided it into three 'rents' of land, capital and ability, and faced the fact that, if he worked with the worst land, tools and brains 'in cultivation', the worst-paid labourer might be producing no more wealth than he consumed.<sup>3</sup>

Certainly Wicksteed's attack on Marx was an important factor in the development of Fabian economic theory. There is every indication that the Fabians were acutely aware of the issues raised by his criticism. In the sense that Wicksteed stimulated the discussion of value and surplus value, it can be said that he made the Fabians aware of the need for a theory of exploitation which did not rely on a labour theory of value. However, there remained with the Fabians a broad agreement with Marx that surplus value was the

<sup>1</sup> S. Webb, "Rent, Interest and Wages".

<sup>2</sup> S. Webb, "The Rate of Interest and the Laws of Distribution", Quarterly Journal of Economics, Jan. 1888.

<sup>3</sup> G. Wallas, Men and Ideas, p. 104.

basis of capitalist exploitation.<sup>1</sup>

The Fabians differed fundamentally from Marx in designating the law of diminishing marginal utility as the origin of a distributive theory of exploitation based upon rent. This substitution led them to the conclusion that Marx (along with other economists)<sup>2</sup> had failed to grasp the opportunity afforded by the Ricardian Theory of Rent to scientifically analyse the distribution of the wealth produced in society.<sup>3</sup> Thus Webb criticised Marx's approach as a "quite orthodox" one involving only a change in nomenclature:

Both in the theory of value and in the theory of exploitation the attitude of Marx leads him into error by drawing too exclusive attention to a part only of the phenomena. For instance the Ricardian Law of Rent is an admitted cornerstone of Economic Science. By claiming rent, interest and profits together in one mass as 'exploitation' Marx misses the whole series of important inferences from this Law. 4

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<sup>1</sup> Thus Webb wrote: "The conception of 'surplus value' is the main result of the labour of Karl Marx in Economics. Its value lies not so much in any newness of doctrine as in inducing clearness of apprehension of the source and destination of this surplus value." "Rent, Interest and Wages", p. 56. Webb also attacked economists, such as Marshall ('antiquated') and Sidgwick (a 'hide-bound pedant') who ignored this contribution.

<sup>2</sup> See S. Webb, "Wages and the Remainder of the Economic Product," in Essays in the Economics of Socialism and Capitalism, ed. R.L. Smyth and T. Wilson (London, 1964), pp. 65-69; also see S. Webb, "The Rate of Interest and the Laws of Distribution," in which he stated, "The laws of distribution must all be given in similar terms, so as theoretically to account for the whole of the annual product, and to account for it with scientific exactness." p. 190.

<sup>3</sup> The insistence upon the scientific analysis of incomes was, of course, the product of Webb's adherence to abstract economics (cf. Webb's fulminations against the 'practical man' school of economics in "Wages and the Remainder of the Economic Product," pp 6-8.

<sup>4</sup> S. Webb, "Rent, Interest and Wages", pp. 12-13.

For Webb a scientific classification of the distribution of the production of wealth necessarily involved a recognition that the first call on wealth created in society was to replenish and restore the existing capital stock. Webb regarded "the turning of income into capital by abstinence and saving is a necessary social function,"<sup>1</sup> and to the extent that saving involved effort and self-denial accepted that it needed to be rewarded.. (However, it was pointed out, that since saving by the wealthy did not involve the same amount of sacrifice as saving by the poor, the question of reward was one of degree, which raised the questions of whether savings should be inherited, and whether the community as a whole could not undertake the socially necessary task of saving).

It was to the balance of the wealth created in society, and which was distributed as income, that Fabians were concerned to apply a scientific analysis. For Webb ,

economists have been singularly backward in continuing the scientific analysis and classification of the wealth product. Having stumbled accidentally on economic rent as a scientific category, luckily finding a kingdom while seeking merely to follow the tracks of their fathers' asses...<sup>2</sup>

"Scientific income classification" involved a recognition that the law of rent applied to all incomes above the datum line of economic

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<sup>1</sup> S. Webb, "Rent, Interest and Wages", pp. 12-13; also see S. Webb, "Wages and the Remainder of the Economic Product", p. 68. "Unless a certain definite portion of the product is produced in such form and dealt with in such a manner as to serve future rather than present utility, the future productivity will be thereby lessened, and by this mark (along with others) we can define off what is merely reproduced capital from the rest of the product." p. 61.

<sup>2</sup> S. Webb, "Wages and the Remainder of the Economic Product," p. 66.

wages, and that as an economic phenomena "rent is a genus of which land rent is only one species."<sup>1</sup> The Fabians saw the attributes of land and capital as being inextricably bound together:<sup>1</sup>

The queer artificial distinction still made between land and capital is merely an illogical physiocratic survival, and economic rent, as Whately acutely observed two generations ago, is a genus of which land rent is only one species. The only real distinction, as Sir Henry Maine pointedly observed, is between movables and immovables, or as the economist has better put it, between capital highly specialized and immobile, and capital less specialized and mobile. 2

Whether the capital was personal (as with ability) or impersonal, whether mobile or immobile, in aggregate rent arose out of the difference in effectiveness between the worst in use and the whole i.e. out of the difference in yields between those operating at the margin and those operating above it. What Marx had called surplus value was in terms of the Fabian scientific analysis merely examples of economic rents which arose out of the differential advantages which land, capital, or ability had over the poorest examples in use. In this light, the creation of wealth was distributed as 'economic wages' and surplus value i.e. as economic wages, plus the economic rent of land, economic rent of ability, and economic rent on capital(or economic interest).

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<sup>1</sup> S. Webb, "The Difficulties of Individualism," Fabian Tract no. 69, p. 9.

<sup>2</sup> Thus in Fabian Tract No. 7, "Capital and Land", which was designed to show that the landlords and the capitalists were "in One Boat", it was stressed "When we consider what is usually called capital, we are as much at a loss to distinguish from it land as we are to find land which does not partake of the attributes of capital...if instruments of production must be classified, the best division of them is into immovables and movables." p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> S. Webb, "Wages and the Remainder of the Economic Product," p. 70.



Economic wages were the return to the least skilled labourer working at the margin of production, with a minimum of capital and skill. Because of the pressure of population, the effect of the law of diminishing marginal utility, meant that labour, as a commodity, was priced according to its return at the margin of production. As an abstract economic class wages tended to a normal level of that of the worst labourer operating at the margin of production (although this minimum subsistence level was conditioned by an historically defined 'standard of comfort'). All incomes above this economic datum line were forms of rent. Diagrammatically Webb illustrated it thus:

Wealth Product	Surplus Value	Economic Rent of Land
		Economic Rent of Ability
		Economic Interest on Capital
	Economic Wages	Economic Wages

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Unless legal and moral restraints were imposed upon the labour market, Webb concluded that "the competitive remuneration of those human beings who contribute service cannot permanently exceed what they would produce with instruments all merely

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<sup>1</sup> Tabular Summary of the Distribution of the Wealth Product in S. Webb, "Rent, Interest and Wages", p. 88.



of marginal effectiveness. Abstracting scarce "personal capital," the ordinary labourer cannot permanently obtain, in a system of competitive wage, more than his potential individual product at the very margin of utilization of land, capital and skill."<sup>1</sup>

Webb's insistence upon the scientific classification of abstract economic categories as it was applied to the concept of economic wages, led during this period to a restrictive view of the effect of trade union activity.<sup>2</sup> Two years after the unpublished article on "Rent, Interest and Wages" was written, Webb was drawn into a public debate with F.A. Walker who was (along with Wicksteed and H. George) a leading exponent of the 'residual claimant' theory of wages (a theory of distribution which refuted the Ricardian wages fund doctrine).

Webb had not been the first theorist to extend the Ricardian law of differential rent to other factors of production, and his

<sup>1</sup>S. Webb, "Wages and the Remainder of the Economic Product", p. 72. See also S. Webb, "The Difficulties of Individualism" pp. 8-10; "Rent, Interest and Wages", p. 46 and "The National Dividend and Its Distribution" in Problems of Modern Industry (London, 1898) for a discussion of the 'standard of comfort' and its effect on the margin of cultivation.

<sup>2</sup> The Fabian theory of rent was not initially an argument for Socialism. Rents, the theory maintained, ought not to be privately enjoyed since they rightfully belonged to the community. As Webb saw it in 1884 when he was working out the theory, the income which the capitalist or landlord received in excess of productive effort or services rendered could be returned to the community either by a moralized capitalist system or by a socialist system. However, once Webb had abandoned his early Positivism, the theory of rent became the rationale of Socialism, and the transfer of rent and interest to public purposes would be brought about by government action. See also Shaw's attitude to the scope of trade union activity in "Transition to Social Democracy", p. 49.

immediate predecessors in this regard had been Alfred Marshall and F.A. Walker.<sup>1</sup> During the course of the public exchange with Walker Webb not only expounded the most systematic statement of the Fabian theory of rent, but set out the implications of abstract economics for the Fabian attitude to wages.

In April 1887, Walker published an article in the Quarterly Journal of Economics in which he attempted to explain the cause

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<sup>1</sup> In his first important paper on the theory of rent Webb gave credit to Marshall and Walker for extending the Ricardian law of differential rent to ability. See "Rent, Interest and Wages", The phrase 'rent of rare natural abilities' was derived from Alfred and Mary Marshall, The Economics of Industry (London, 1879), p. 144, where it formed part of an analysis of 'the earnings of management'. However, Marshall's Principles was not published until after the Fabians had formulated their theory. It has been suggested that Marshall was influenced by the Fabians. See P.W. Fox and H.S. Gordon, "The Early Fabians--Economists and Reformers", Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science, Vol. XVII, August 1951, p. 312. Webb, himself, complained that "Marshall has cut the ground from under my feet, and said much that I meant to say...Now Marshall has incorporated much of what I have been thinking." letter to Beatrice Potter 23 August 1890, PP. Webb criticised Marshall's Principles, saying it hardly contained anything new, and remarked "I think...that he has failed to rid himself quite of the erroneous old notion that Land differs from other forms of capital and the faulty contrast between Increasing and Decreasing Return is a corollary. He has taken from me what he calls 'Quasi-Rent', but not my further point of both Land and Capital being equally under both Increasing and Decreasing Return." letter to Beatrice Potter 13 August 1890, PP. G.D.H. Cole, noting that Marshall "did not like being told" that he had been influenced by the Fabians, says that the Fabians influenced Marshall's notion of quasi-rent. See Cole's notes on Fox and Gordon, Op. Cit. McBriar dismisses the idea of Fabian influence on Marshall as "unproven and unlikely", despite the fact that Marshall was well known for disclaiming the influence of any contemporary marginalist. "Marshall's views were usually known long before he published them, and it is probable that the Fabians were aware of them." Op. Cit. pp. 39-40, n. 2. Walker's major works were Political Economy (N.Y., 1893; no English edition) and A Brief Text Book of Political Economy (London, 1885). He subsequently elaborated his version of the rent theory in "The Source of Business Profits", Quarterly Journal of Economics, April 1887.

of high profits.<sup>1</sup> The question of high business profits was a particular problem for capitalist economists, for according to the accepted economic model, profits, under perfect competition, would tend to fall to equilibrium level. However, as Walker and others observed, the developments in capitalist economies had proved otherwise.

Walker argued that business profits were a kind of 'rent'-- a differential return that originated in the superior skill of particular employers. Even under conditions of perfect competition employers with exceptional ability would produce a profit greater than the normal interest rate on capital. Unusually high profits represented a surplus which was created by the employer. "This surplus" Walker argued,

in the case of any employer, represents that which he is able to produce over and above what an employer of the lowest industrial grade can produce with equal amounts of labour and capital. In other words this surplus is of his own creation, produced by that business ability which raises him above and distinguishes him from employers of what may be called the no profit class. 2

Thus high business profits were a differential return arising from an employer's superior ability.

Like superior land, superior ability, when applied to a fixed amount of capital and labour, had the capacity to produce a differential return. Walker therefore used the phrase 'rent of ability.' However, rent as Walker used the term did not entail

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<sup>1</sup> F.A. Walker, "The Source of Business Profits".

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., pp. 274-5.

any ethical condemnation but simply described the income from a differential advantage. Rents of ability were not exploitative for they represented a special productive contribution. Walker stated at the end of his article,

if this be correct we see how mistaken is that opinion of the wages class, which regards the successful employer of labour--men who realize large fortunes in manufactures or trade--as having in some way injured or robbed them....1

Walker's article provoked a response from Webb in the January issue of the same journal. Webb began by recapitulating the arguments of his unpublished essay of 1886. All incomes were proportionate to an 'economic wage' and any income above this was, Webb argued, the result of productive power not shared by others. "Any larger product (than economic wages)" he wrote, "obtained elsewhere by an equivalent amount of labour must be the result of the employment of more advantageous land, or more effective labour, or of capital."<sup>2</sup> Monopolies of productive power prevented equality of return to equivalent toil and resulted in a differential return.

The crux of the debate was whether superior ability was sufficiently productive to produce high business profits. While agreeing that superior ability resulted in a differential return, Webb rejected Walker's contention that business profits could be accounted for by the relative ability of employers. Webb argued that there was a differential return beyond that on land and

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1 F.A. Walker, "The Source of Business Profits", p. 279.

2 S. Webb, "The Rate of Interest and the Laws of Distribution", Quarterly Journal of Economics, Jan. 1888.



ability. "...there is still variation in the product of equal labour under different circumstances, even after allowing for economic rent of 'land' and 'ability'."<sup>1</sup> The variation, Webb argued, came from the use of capital and resulted in 'economic interest'. Profits resulted from the use of capital not from the relative ability of one employer as compared with another, "Economic interest...not 'rent of ability' is the keystone of the arch."<sup>2</sup>

Walker thus regarded economic wages as a residuum--his distribution theory maintained that it was the other shares in the distribution of the wealth product which were determined independently, so as to leave the share of economic wages as a residual claimant. In this regard, Walker, along with Sidgwick and Henry George, was a prominent huntsman in the then popular chase to kill off the wage-fund theory.

The debate over the Ricardian wage-fund theory had been considerably invigorated by J.S. Mill's celebrated 'recantation' in 1869 of his former support for the wage-fund theory,<sup>3</sup> and this debate as to whether the share of the national wealth to be paid out as wages was fixed in advanced was carried over into the 1880's and 1890's. During the period of his attachment to abstract economics Webb (and less clearly Shaw) came down on the side of the opponents of what Webb termed the 'illimitability of wages' school.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> S. Webb, "The Rate of Interest and the Laws of Distribution", p. 201.

<sup>2</sup>

Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>

Although Mill's abandonment of the wage-fund doctrine was by no means as comprehensive as the popular excitement over his 'recantation' would suggest there is a curious discontinuity between Webb's abstract economics and J.S. Mill in this regard. See P. Schwartz, The New Political Economy of J.S. Mill (London, 1968), pp. 67-103. For the best treatment of Mill's exchanges with Thornton and Fawcett over the wages-fund controversy; see also J. Schumpeter, History of Economic Analysis, pp. 667-671.



Briefly the wages-fund theory was the demand side of the Ricardian doctrine of wages (the supply side involving the theory of population) according to which in the long run and in the short the amount of wealth product to be apportioned out as wages was fixed or determined by the accumulation of capital. That is to say that the amount of national wealth to be paid out as wages was a determinate amount limited by the rate of accumulation of capital. In the long run the supply of labour varied according to the standard of living, increasing as it rose, and decreasing as it fell; on the demand side the demand for labour varied according to the rate of capital accumulation. At equilibrium, there was a natural rate of wages thus determined at which the working class was able to maintain the supply of labour demanded by the rate of capital accumulation. In the short run, with the supply of labour relatively fixed, the total demand for labour was supposed to be determined by the amount of wage capital accumulated in the previous year which had been set aside for wage payment purposes. Thus the Ricardian theory of distribution regarded the call upon the national wealth product as a fixed and limited amount, and it was profits which remained as a residual item.

As the debate with Walker indicated Webb, in the period prior to his abandonment of abstract economics, whilst never embracing the wages-fund theory of distribution as such, regarded the abstract scientific category of economic wages as being rigidly determined.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> As Schumpeter correctly pointed out neither the wages-fund theory nor that of its opponents logically supports the case for or against trade unions. See J. Schumpeter, History of Economic Analysis, p. 670. Nevertheless the evidence of their later views on the wages-fund controversy seems to indicate that the Webbs did regard it as opposed to trade union activity. Industrial Democracy, part III, chap. I in passim. This makes Webbs insistence that the return to economic wages was fixed curious, particularly in the light of Mill's celebrated 'recantation'.

(The very title of his address to the British Association for the Advancement of Science in 1889 indicated his rejection of Walker's residual claimant theory of wages.<sup>1</sup>) As has been seen, Webb regarded the national wealth product, once the existing capital stock had been replenished, as being distributed at equilibrium<sup>2</sup> as economic wages, with the residual amount going to economic rent, and he believed that without collective regulation of the market competition tended to drive down the rate of economic wages to the margin of subsistence:

The competitive remuneration of those human beings who contribute service cannot permanently exceed what they would produce with instruments all merely of marginal effectiveness. Abstracting scarce 'personal capital', the ordinary labourer cannot permanently obtain in a system of competitive wage, more than his potential individual product at the very margin of utilization of land, capital and skill.<sup>3</sup>

Thus any income above this datum line of economic wages was for Webb that form of surplus value constituted by rent.

From this economic datum line the extra produce known variously as rent, interest, wages of superintendence or generally as profits, or surplus value, must be computed.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> S. Webb, "Wages and the Remainder of the Economic Product".

<sup>2</sup> This equilibrium point was according to the law of diminishing marginal utility. See S. Webb, "The Rate of Interest and the Laws of Distribution", p. 194. It was in this regard that Webb saw marginal utility analysis as the true theoretical basis of surplus value, rather than Marx's notion of the labour theory of value. See S. Webb, "Rent, Interest and Wages", pp. 13-15, 24-26.

<sup>3</sup> S. Webb, "Wages and the Remainder of the Economic Product", p. 72.

<sup>4</sup> S. Webb, "The Rate of Interest and the Laws of Distribution" p. 198.

Thus for Webb this return to superior factors by its very nature could never accrue to wages.

The economic class wages can therefore never include any part of the result of the existence of immovable or movable capital or (scarce) personal capital superior in effectiveness to the very worst in use. Its limits as well as theirs prevent it trenching on the other income classes. <sup>1</sup>

Thus for so long as individualism went unchecked or uncontrolled the working class (in the absence of a rent of ability, or a raising of the margin of production to which their economic wages tended) could not look for any improvement in their economic circumstances, for the whole gain of any improvement, invention or other economic advance would necessarily accrue, in a situation of free competition, to rent.

The mere worker, qua worker, is necessarily working, as far as its own remuneration is concerned, on the very worst land in economic use, with the very minimum advantage of industrial capital. Every development towards a freer individualism must, indeed, inevitably emphasise the power of the owner of the superior instruments of wealth production to obtain for himself all the advantages of their superiority...So long as the instruments of production are in unrestrained private ownership, so long must the tribute of the workers to the drones continue: so long will the toilers' reward inevitably be reduced by their exactions...the whole equivalent of every source of fertility or advantage of all

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<sup>1</sup> S. Webb, "Wages and the Remainder of the Economic Product", p. 71.

land over and above the worst in economic use is under free competition necessarily abstracted from the mere worker on it. 1

It was in this sense that the Fabian theory of rent became effective as a thoroughgoing socialist argument,<sup>2</sup> for unless the state acted to regulate individualism and transfer rent, the forces of competition, would, other things being equal, maintain economic wages at the margin of subsistence, and allow landlords, capitalists and possessors of superior ability to appropriate the whole of any increased return as economic rent. Thus Shaw saw in the establishment of income tax, the Factory Acts, increased public education, and municipal enterprise a progress towards Socialism through the limitation of the ability of capitalists, landlords and possessors of superior ability to solely appropriate the whole of economic rent into their own hands.<sup>3</sup> For Webb the inherent Socialism of the Fabian theory of rent rested in this fact: that only through Socialism could the working class hope to secure any part of the surplus value which had been expropriated from them as rent.

unless he through the collective organisation of the community can obtain more and more control over the instruments of production, the ordinary

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<sup>1</sup> S. Webb, "The Difficulties of Individualism", p.8.  
It was in this sense that Webb asserted, "the power to exact the surplus value from the workers will in fact always be in the hands of any class which can exert authority over them"; and identified landlords, capitalists and possessors of superior ability as the three groups to whom surplus value accrued. S. Webb, "Rent, Interest and Wages", p. 56.

<sup>2</sup> cf. A.M. McBriar, Fabian Socialism and English Politics, p. 42.

<sup>3</sup> G.B. Shaw, "Transition to Social Democracy", in passim.



labourer has no pecuniary interest in any industrial improvements except in so far as they cause a raising of the "margin of utilization." He enjoys merely the "marginal effectiveness" of the triumphs of invention and the long result of time, and only by more and more asserting his collective ownership and control over land and industrial capital can the ordinary worker come in any way to participate in the economic advantages of the fertile lands, rich mines, advantageous sites and industrial inventions in which, affecting as they do much more the total than the marginal effectiveness, he is at present almost as little personally interested as if they were in Jupiter or Saturn. This is the lesson to be learnt from scientific income classification...to demand more factory acts, the taxation of mining royalties and ground rents, increased income taxes, municipalization of all monopolies and land nationalization itself. 1

As an abstract economist Webb elaborated a theory of distribution in which economic wages as a scientific category were determined by natural laws.<sup>2</sup> This theory whilst never embracing the wages-fund doctrine as an alternative<sup>3</sup>, clearly rejected the point of view advanced by Walker and the anti-wages-fund school that wages, as a residuum, were potentially illimitable. Webb thus attempted to give to the laws of distribution what George had termed a 'common centre'--this 'common centre' was the Fabian theory of rent, in the sense that it excluded the possibility that as an abstract category economic wages might be indeterminate.

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<sup>1</sup> S. Webb, "Wages and the Remainder of the Economic Product", p. 73.

<sup>2</sup> Webb said, "the most interesting problem in modern economics is the description and classification of that part of the product of industry which remains to the capitalist manufacturer after the payment of wages and other outgoings...the problem is to find the natural laws which express the division of the fruits of our labour among the several classes of participators." S. Webb, "Rent, Interest and Wages", p. 22.

<sup>3</sup> Note however that Webb described Bohm-Bawerk's Positive Theory of Capital as "a great book, which I think has convinced me." letter Sidney Webb to Beatrice Potter 1891, PP.

It is implied by the fact of classification that each of these categories is determinate and can be marked off by its own essential economic attributes. It follows that the class wages, in the economic meaning of this term of classification, is, like rent, rigidly fixed by the data of each case: whatever the actual division of the produce the Newcastle capitalist may arrange with his own hands. 1

In the last resort, although Webb saw that both the wages fund theory and that of its opponents were flawed by the lack of a scientific approach, and whilst the scientific approach was not concerned with the actual day to day determination of wages but with analytical truths,<sup>2</sup> his "careful investigation shows indeed that the category of wages, at any rate in the scientific analysis is as rigidly determinate and limited as the others nor is this result arrived at by any claptrap as to the product of labour."<sup>3</sup> Thus Webb determined that "the reaction against the Wages Fund theory has in fact been carried too far,"<sup>4</sup> and as an abstract economist he therefore emphasised the necessity of collectivist control over rent as the chief method of ameliorating the economic condition of the working class, with very little emphasis on the scope for trade union activity. The subsequent abandonment of abstract economics in the mid-nineties involved not only a change in this emphasis on trade union activity, but an abrupt change in emphasis on the wages fund issue.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>S. Webb, "Wages and the Remainder of the Economic Product", p. 68.

<sup>2</sup>Webb acknowledged that the wages-fund theory in the short run could not adequately explain the determination of 'actual objective wages', but at this time this was not his objective.

<sup>3</sup>S. Webb, "Wages and the Remainder of the Economic Product", p. 69.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 68.

<sup>5</sup>cf. S. and B. Webb, Industrial Democracy, part III, chap. I in passim.

Thus the Fabian theory of distribution retained a theory of exploitation based upon surplus value-- but upon a surplus value originating in rent. Rent was thus exploitative in the sense that the theory of rent described how the worker could never under free competition and without superior ability reap any more advantage from his labour than his economic wage-- everything else was expropriated from him as rent. As an abstract category Webb regarded economic wages as tending to subsistence in a competitive economy, other things being equal, so that the chief hope for economic salvation of the working class lay in the extension of collectivist control over the competitive market to secure for the working class some part of the fruits of their labour which the operation of the law of rent necessarily creamed off. (In this sense logic and right were rolled into one.<sup>1</sup>)

It is worth stressing again that the Fabian theory of rent was not initially an argument for Socialism. As Webb saw it in 1884 when he was working out the theory, the income which the capitalist or landlord received in excess of productive effort or services rendered could be returned to the community by a moralized capitalist system. Largely as a result of the discussions of Marx the theory of rent grew into a theory of capitalist exploitation which became the economic rationale of the Fabians' Socialism. The transfer of rents for public purposes would be brought about by collectivist intervention. In this manner a

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<sup>1</sup> cf. A.M. McBriar, Fabian Socialism and English Politics, p. 47.

Socialist government, which represented the community as a whole, would correct the inequalities that arose from rent by extracting rent and interest from individual ownership through severe progressive taxation and the transfer of services to social control.

Before 1887 the character of Fabian economic thought was very unsettled. The Fabians were feeling their way toward a new formulation of a theory of exploitation. The vigorous controversy between the adherents of Jevons and Marx and the new theories of the Liberal economists of the Ricardian tradition stimulated Fabian thinking and were important factors in the development of a distinct non-Marxian notion of exploitation. However, there were other factors which had an important bearing on the Fabian rejection of Marx and the creation of an alternative doctrine.

The Ricardian law of rent had been an effective weapon in the hands of the land nationalizers and Henry Georgeites. There was a long tradition of hostility to land-lordism in England. Attacks on land monopoly had been almost continuous from Thomas Spence, William Ogilvie and Bronterre O'Brien to Herbert Spencer. Between 1860 and 1880 numerous land reform associations were founded, including the Land and Labour League, the Land Tenure Reform Association and the Land Reform Union.<sup>1</sup> John Stuart Mill and John E. Cairnes had been active in the Land Tenure Reform Association and in his early days Joseph Chamberlain had made an issue of land reform. When Henry George's

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<sup>1</sup>The Land and Labour League and the Land Tenure Reform Association agreed that the unearned increment from land values belonged properly to society as a whole. The Land and Labour League advocated land nationalization while the Land Tenure Reform Association proposed to tax away the unearned increment. The Land Reform Union was the successor of the Land and Labour League.



Progress and Poverty became popular in the early eighties the movement against land-lordism was given greater impetus.

Progress and Poverty with its explanation of poverty in the midst of wealth and its land reform message evoked a strong response. The book had an enormous circulation and George's views enjoyed wide popularity. Emile de Laveleye wrote in the Contemporary Review in 1883 that Progress and Poverty "is at this moment selling by the thousands in alleys and back streets of England, and is being welcomed there as a glorious gospel of social justice."<sup>1</sup> Indeed, George may be credited with giving many of the early Fabian leaders the stimulus for reform.<sup>2</sup> The Fabians were acutely aware of the importance of George's ideas and while they rejected George's solution as limited and trivial,<sup>3</sup> they recognized the "irresistible force of its popularization of Ricardo's law of Rent."<sup>4</sup> An extended version of the Ricardian law of rent might be used with as much force against the capitalist as it had against the land-lord. Thus while George was of little theoretical importance in the development of the Fabian theory of rent, the popularity of his ideas and his influence as a propagandist may have suggested to the Fabians the practical value in using the Ricardian law of rent to show

<sup>1</sup>Contemporary Review April 1883.

<sup>2</sup>The best example is, of course, Shaw. Olivier had come under the influence of George and was active in the Land Reform Union. Webb remarked, "Little as Mr. Henry George intended it, there can be no doubt that it was the enormous circulation of his Progress and Poverty, which gave the touch which caused all the seething influences to crystallize into a popular Socialist movement. The optimistic and confident tone of the book and the irresistible force of its popularization of Ricardo's Law of Rent, sounded the dominant 'note' of the English Socialist party of today. Adherents of Mr. George's views gathered into little propagandist societies and gradually developed in many cases into complete socialists." Socialism in England (London, 1893), p. 21.

<sup>3</sup>Pease, Op. Cit. p. 21.

<sup>4</sup>S. Webb Socialism in England, p. 21.

that the capitalist was in the same position as the land-lord.

Radicals were already familiar with the doctrines of Ricardo, Mill and George. The Fabian theory might have been expected to tap the resources of the land nationalization movement and to have a broad popular appeal among radical audiences. It might also have appeal to the left wing of the Liberal Party which had fought an election on Joseph Chamberlain's 'unauthorized programme.'

Whether or not there was such an opportunist component which contributed to the development of the Fabian theory of rent is problematic. However it is clear that once the theory was formulated, the Fabians did not fail to appreciate its Radical appeal. The same year that Webb produced his article on the theory of rent, the Society published a popular Tract, Capital and Land. The pamphlet, which was written by Olivier, was addressed to a Radical audience familiar with land nationalization and Georgeite propaganda. The major portion of the pamphlet was devoted to proving that land-lords and capitalists were really 'in one boat.'<sup>1</sup>

The following year, 1889, Webb contributed a series of articles on "Henry George and Socialism" to The Church Reformer.<sup>2</sup> The articles, written with full appreciation for "Mr. George's graphic demonstrations of the effect of the Law of Rent",<sup>3</sup> were addressed to George and the English Land Restoration League and were concerned to illustrate the

<sup>1</sup>Tract No. 7, Capital and Land 1888.

<sup>2</sup>S. Webb, "Henry George and Socialism," The Church Reformer, Jan. and March, 1889. PP VII, 10 and 11.

<sup>3</sup>S. Webb, "Henry George and Socialism," Jan. 1889.

similarity between the positions of the Georgeites and the Socialists. Despite George's denunciations of Socialism and denials that he himself was a Socialist, he had, Webb noted, proposed that the government should take control of capital improvements on land such as railways, canals, docks, etc. "as well as absorb the whole rent of mere land."<sup>1</sup> "This," Webb maintained, "almost reduces his theoretic differences from Socialism to such a far distant point as the nationalization of 'circulating capital', and leaves his whole practical influence absolutely in line with English Socialist politics."<sup>2</sup>

In an attempt to demonstrate that the 'quibble' between the Land Nationalizers and the Socialists was a "mere question of a nomenclature as to which ... instruments of wealth production ought to be called land and which capital",<sup>3</sup> Webb argued,

... all such of Mr. George's arguments as are founded on the Law of Rent apply to the rent of this 'capital' as well as to that of 'land'. The landless worker is equally driven to the 'margin of cultivation', and absolutely deprived of all the benefits of the cultivated England of to-day, whether that cultivated England be called land or capital ...<sup>4</sup>

The net return on all capital improvements on land was, Webb declared,

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<sup>1</sup>S. Webb, "Henry George and Socialism", The Church Reformer, Jan. 1889.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., March 1889

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

determined according to the Ricardian Law of Rent, and the ownership, if not the industrial utilisation, of them could be nationalized (or municipalised) without economic danger, and with enormous social advantage.<sup>1</sup>

He concluded that it was 'absurd' for the Land Nationalizers and Socialists to argue for "the individual ownership of those means of production which yield a net economic rent is what they both want gradually superseded by collective control."<sup>2</sup>

If there were immediate practical advantages in developing an economic theory which encompassed the land question and extended the attack on rent, there were also important practical reasons for repudiating Marx. Marx's theories had come to be associated in the public mind with the romantic insurrectionary phrase-mongering of the Social Democratic Federation. The Social Democratic Federation had failed in its bid to win the London Radical Clubs and Marxism was associated with that failure. Thus where Marxism might have proved a hinderance to Fabian attempts to permeate the Radicals, an extended theory of rent might be used to capitalize on familiar and accepted ideas.

The Fabian theory of rent was also seen as a useful counter to individualistic Anarchism. In the Impossibilities of Anarchism, first produced in 1888, when the Anarchists were active in the Socialist League, Shaw argued that the individualist Anarchist solution to the problem of equality of distribution failed to circumvent the problem

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<sup>1</sup>S. Webb, "Henry George and Socialism", The Church Reformer, March 1889.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.



of rent.<sup>1</sup> Shaw began by stating the economic proposals of the Individualist Anarchists:

Destroy the money monopoly, the tariff monopoly, and the patent monopoly. Enforce then only those land titles which rest on personal occupancy or cultivation; and the social problem of how to secure to each worker the product of his own labour will be solved simply by everyone minding his own business.<sup>2</sup>

Against the Individualist Anarchist Shaw argued that even if their recommendations were implemented differential returns would automatically arise. The effect of making the occupier the owner "would be, not to abolish his advantages over his less favourably circumstanced competitors, but simply to authorize him to put it into his own pocket instead of handing it over to the land-lord."<sup>3</sup> Any form of private appropriation of land, even as limited by Individualist Anarchism to owner occupiers, would result in the "unjust distribution of a vast fund of social wealth called rent."<sup>4</sup> The only way to ensure just distribution was through a Socialist state.

Later Shaw carried the argument further, claiming that the theory of rent was the only effective answer to this type of Anarchism. In his Appendix to Pease's History, Shaw insisted that "any attempt to discard the old economic basis of the law of rent immediately produced a recrudescence of Anarchism."<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup>It was revised and delivered as a lecture to the Fabian Society in 1891 and published as a Tract by the Society in 1893. The tract contains a criticism of both Individualist Anarchism and Communist Anarchism.

<sup>2</sup>A paraphrase by Shaw of Benjamin R. Tucker. Tract 45, pp. 5-6.

<sup>3</sup>Tract 45, p. 8.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>5</sup>Shaw, Appendix to Pease, Op. Cit., p. 282.

There is no doubt that the Fabians considered their theory of rent a great contribution to Socialist thought. However, after its final formulation, they found it necessary to expound it in full in only a few of their publications. This generalized concept of rent, as M. Dobb has pointed out, amounted to "much the same thing as Marx meant by surplus value: the product of social labour which is appropriated by a propertied class by virtue, not of any economic function they perform, but of their special position in a society divided into propertied and propertyless."<sup>1</sup>

However, the Fabian reaction to Marx cannot be examined solely within the confines of the debate on theories of value and surplus value. There were other areas in which their debts to and departures from Marx were no less significant. If they regarded their own theory of rent as explaining the phenomena of 'surplus value' more effectively and realistically than Marxian analysis did, they nevertheless regarded Marx as a powerful critic of capitalism. Thus, Webb, even while dismissing Marx's contribution to 'pure economics', conceded "his valuable services to economic history, and as a stirrer of men's minds."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>M. Dobb, "Bernard Shaw and Economics", in On Economic Theory and Socialism (London, 1955), p. 206.

<sup>2</sup>S. Webb, Socialism in England, p. 85.

Pease said that in so far as "Marx demonstrated the moral bankruptcy of commercialism ... it is hardly possible to exaggerate the value of ... (his) service to humanity."<sup>1</sup>

But perhaps, Pease understates the deep impression that Marx's moral passion and stinging indictment of bourgeois society made upon the Fabians. Shaw in his critique of Marx's economic theory had paid tribute to Marx's "relentless Jeremiad against the bourgeoisie":

(Marx's) burning conviction that the old order is one of fraud and murder; that its basis is neither kingcraft nor priestcraft but the divorce of the labourer from the material without which his labour is barren.<sup>1</sup>

Shaw recommended Socialists to "read Jevons and the rest for your economics" and "read Marx for the history of their working in the past and the considerations of their application in the present and never mind the metaphysics."<sup>2</sup>

What Asa Briggs called the 'power' of Clarke's Fabian essay sprang from its Marxist stand which combined an impassioned moral critique with economic analysis.<sup>3</sup> There is also a strong tone of moral indignation in Shaw's essay on the "Economic Basis of Socialism" which reflected his reading of Marx's discussion of the proletariat in Capital.

It was not only the moral passion of Marx's indictment of capitalism that impressed the Fabians, but also the documentation of that

<sup>1</sup>G.B. Shaw, "Karl Marx and Das Kapital," National Reformer, Aug. 1887.

<sup>2</sup>G.B. Shaw, "Bluffing the Value Theory," To-Day, May, 1889.

<sup>3</sup>See G.B.S., Fabian Essays, with a new Introduction by A. Briggs (London, 1962). And cf. W. Clarke, "Industrial." Fabian Essays.

indictment. In his Fabian Essay, Webb referred the reader to Marx's Capital and Engels' The Condition of the English Working Class for a description of the "inequities" which resulted from "freedom of contract and complete laissez-faire."<sup>1</sup> In this respect it is worth noting that "What to Read: A List for Social Reformers" prepared by Graham Wallas and published as a Fabian tract in 1891, listed Marx as suggested reading for courses in economics and socialism.<sup>2</sup> Capital was also contained in the book boxes in circulation for the Fabian correspondence courses.<sup>3</sup>

Shaw, who was "impressed with the literary power and overwhelming documentation of Marx's indictment of nineteenth century Commercialism and the Capitalist System"<sup>4</sup> was convinced that:

Das Kapital had changed the mind of Europe ... by the terrific battery of official facts dug out by Marx in the British Museum Reading Room from the reports of factory inspectors.<sup>5</sup>

In fact, Shaw, who was not known for his modesty, claimed that it was his perception of the importance of this aspect of Marx's writings which was behind the writing of "Facts for Socialists." "I knew what people needed," wrote Shaw, "and that Webb alone could do it."<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup>S. Webb, "Historic," Fabian Essays, p. 41 n 2.

<sup>2</sup>Fabian Tract No. 29.

<sup>3</sup>Economic Teaching and a Library for Labour Clubs, Socialist Societies, Trade Unions and Other Organizations, (London, Oct., 1898).

<sup>4</sup>G.B. Shaw, Appendix to Pease, Op. Cit., p. 275. Also see G.B. Shaw, "The Transition to Social Democracy," Fabian Essays, Op. Cit., p. 179.

<sup>5</sup>G.B. Shaw, "Early Days," in M. Cole, ed., The Webbs and Their Work, pp. 7-8.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 7.



Whether or not Marx's work inspired the Fabians in their determination to make facts available is problematic. Nevertheless, it is clear that the Fabians were greatly impressed by the wealth of historical material in volume one of Capital, particularly the quotations from contemporary blue-books and the reports of factory inspectors on the wretched conditions of factory labour. One of the most striking characteristics of Fabian publications was their attention to factual detail. It is worth noting, that in respect of the careful research and thorough documentation, Engels regarded Fabian propaganda as the best produced in England.<sup>1</sup>

Whilst the Fabians' emphasis on facts in their propaganda may indicate the direct and persuasive influence of Marx, some Fabian writings reveal a more general association with his ideas. A number of elements in Fabian Essays appear to have been adopted from Marxist theory, although the conclusions drawn from them were not Marxist. There are references to the narrowing numbers of the capitalist class and to the tendency toward the immiseration of the working class. Shaw noted the dehumanizing aspect of man's sale of himself as a commodity, while Olivier noted the self-contradictory nature of capitalism.<sup>2</sup> However, the most pronounced debt to Marx is to be found in Clarke's essay on the "Industrial Basis of Socialism."

<sup>1</sup>Engels to Sorge, 18 Jan., 1893, Selected Correspondence of Marx and Engels (National Book Agency, Calcutta), p. 444. Some of the more popular propaganda works of the period such as Blatchford's Merrile England relied on Fabian sources for factual material.

<sup>2</sup>G.B. Shaw, Fabian Essays, pp. 18-19, 121.

Clarke, as previously noted, accepted more of the Marxian analysis of economic development than any other Fabian. In 1887, he thought that the internal contradictions of capitalism were rapidly developing toward a revolutionary climax. In a letter to a friend, Clarke wrote:

After all the great barrier to any peaceful solution is the necessary evolution of capitalism itself. That evolution is practically independent of our volition, unless we determine to change absolutely the form of society. I mean that, given modern social forces ... certain results must follow, whether we like them or not. These results are in the main (and allowing for certain exceptions) (1) the massing of the idle capitalist class on the one side, (2) the massing of wage-slaves on the other side, (3) the displacement of human labour by machinery and consequent increase in the margin of unemployed labour (4) commercial crises and disorganization of labour (5) the reducing of the standard of wages to that on which cheaper labour cannot subsist. While (6) all the time the work people are becoming more discontented, better informed, and more conscious of their power.<sup>1</sup>

Unlike other Fabians, Clarke was then deeply pessimistic about the possibilities for peaceful change and predicted violent class struggle. "My own belief," he said, is that we are in for a fierce, bloody struggle ... and possibly even absolute social anarchy (though I hope not) ... What I fear most is that there may be serious strife before the workers are well prepared for it."<sup>2</sup>

While Clarke did not advocate violence, he did, in 1887, regard it as an historic possibility. However, by the following year he had modified his views sufficiently to conclude that "socialistic

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<sup>1</sup>Clarke to Salter, 3 Nov., 1887, Lloyd Papers, Quoted in Weiler, Op. Cit.

<sup>2</sup>Clarke to Salter, 3 Nov., 1887, Lloyd Papers, Quoted in Wolfe, Op. Cit.

legislation ... prevents in England the wilder developments of revolutionary socialism with which the world is familiar in France and Germany."<sup>1</sup> There was no hint of violent change in the "Industrial Basis of Socialism," whose analysis of monopoly capitalism was Clarke's major contribution to Fabianism.

Clarke regarded the technological upheaval of the industrial revolution as the decisive force in modern history. It had, he said, "changed the whole basis of our industrial and therefore of our social and political life."<sup>2</sup> How the change in the 'condition of material production' had effected a 'revolution in ... modern life' was the subject of Clarke's contribution to Fabian Essays.

The essay owes much to Clarke's study of Marx. Indeed, when Clarke first presented the essay as a lecture to the Society it included a number of quotations from the Communist Manifesto.<sup>3</sup>

The essay combined a moral critique of capitalism with an economic analysis showing how capitalism could be replaced by Socialism. Clarke's moral argument condemned the oppressive and exploitative relationships intrinsic to industrial capitalism. In a savage indictment he declared that "unrestrained capitalism tends as surely to cruelty and oppression as did feudalism or chattel slavery."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>W. Clarke, "The Influence of Socialism on English Politics," Political Science Quarterly, Dec. 1888.

<sup>2</sup>W. Clarke, "In Paris at the Centennial of the French Revolution," New England Magazine, Sept., 1889, p. 100.

<sup>3</sup>See report in To-Day Vol. X, p. 186. The quotations were deleted from the published edition.

<sup>4</sup>Clarke, "Industrial," Fabian Essays, p. 78.

The most interesting and original aspect of the essay was its analysis of monopoly capitalism. Clarke examined the evolution of joint stock companies, rings and trusts and the growing separation between ownership and administration in large corporations and suggested how Socialism could supplant capitalism. He explained this development in dialectical fashion.

"It is", Clarke wrote:

a leading thought in modern philosophy that in its process of development each institution tends to cancel itself. Its special function is born out of social necessities; its progress is determined by attractions and repulsions which arise in society, producing a certain effect which tends to negate the original function.<sup>1</sup>

The conditions of modern capitalism, Clarke argued, create huge monopolies and "well defined aggregations of capital."<sup>2</sup> The inevitable result of the massing of capital into great combinations was the differentiation of manager and capitalist. The capitalist had "abdicated his position of overseer" and had become "a mere rent or interest receiver."<sup>3</sup> The professional manager now performed the work of the capitalist.

Not only had the joint stock company undermined the position of the capitalist, but it had overturned the very principle upon which capitalism was based. Capitalism, Clarke argued, rose on the basis of free competition. However, rings and trusts were crushing out the

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<sup>1</sup> Clarke "Industrial" p. 83. It is interesting to note that Clarke called Hegel "the greatest modern philosopher". "The Limits of Collectivism," Contemporary Review, LXII, Feb., 1895, p. 267.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p. 67.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p. 84.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p. 89.



small competitor replacing "competition by combination."<sup>1</sup> "Thus we see", Clarke said, "that capitalism has cancelled its original principle - is itself negating its own existence."<sup>2</sup>

The giant combinations of monopoly capitalism, were Clarke maintained, destroying

that very freedom which the modern democratic State posits as its first principle ... the development of capitalism and that of democracy cannot proceed without checks on parallel lines. Rather they are comparable to two trains approaching each other from different directions on the same line. Collision between the opposing forces seems inevitable.<sup>3</sup>

Confronted with this problem, the State had three courses of action open to it. It could prohibit and dissolve the great combinations of capital; it could tax and control them; or it could absorb and administer them. "In either case," Clarke said, "the Socialist theory is ipso facto admitted, for each is a confession that it is well to exercise a collective control over industrial capital."<sup>4</sup> As these combinations were "the most economical and efficient methods of organizing production and exchange" it was clear that their destruction would be a "distinctly retrogressive policy."<sup>5</sup> Thus

<sup>1</sup> Clarke "Industrial" p. 83. It is interesting to note that Clarke called Hegel "the greatest modern philosopher". "The Limits of Collectivism," Contemporary Review, LXII, Feb., 1895, p. 89.

<sup>2</sup> Clarke, "Industrial", p. 87.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 98.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 99

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., pp. 98, 99.

some form of social ownership or control was necessary. Indeed the very nature of capitalist economic development contained the solution to the problem. The replacement of the capitalist entrepreneur by the salaried manager demonstrated that large corporations need not be privately owned.

The answer of Socialism to the capitalist is that society can do without him, just as society now does without the slave-owner or feudal lord, both of whom were formerly regarded as necessary to the well-being and even the very existence of society. In organizing its own business for itself, society can employ, at whatever rate of remuneration may be needed to call forth their powers, those capitalists who are skilled organizers and administrators. But those who are dividend-receivers will no longer be permitted to levy a contribution on labour, but must earn their living by useful industry as other and better people have to do.<sup>1</sup>

In creating monopolies, capitalism had negated not only its own principle of free competition but also its own classic defence, that private ownership of wealth is necessary to maximize economic efficiency and growth.

While Clarke's essay drew heavily on his observations of the American scene, he was indebted to Marx for the argument that under capitalism the increasing concentration of ownership made production so centralized that it was no longer compatible with the legal institution of private property.

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<sup>1</sup>W. Clarke, "Industrial," Fabian Essays, p. 99.

If the Fabians generally admired Marx's factual indictment of capitalism and adopted some Marxist categories, the bulk of Marxist methodology and the doctrine of class conflict remained an anathema. To some degree this critical attitude sprang from the Fabian cast of mind: impatient with abstractions, critical of monistic explanations, questioning of dogma and empirical in outlook. It was also in part due to a misunderstanding of Marx as well as a confusion of Marx's thought with the doctrinaire pronouncements of the Social Democratic Federation.

With the exception of Clarke and Bland, the Fabians characterized the Marxist method as one of mystifying 'dialectics' and 'metaphysics'.<sup>1</sup> Webb disparagingly observed that "we quickly discover that he (Marx) has no special means of discovering truth, but only a Teutonic capacity for over-subtle analysis."<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Shaw dismissed Marxist dialectics as 'pseudo-Hegelian jargon that only philosophers could understand and nobody could read.'<sup>3</sup>

The Fabian critique of the Marxist method in no way rested upon a thorough-going examination of its philosophical basis, and their characterization of Marx's attempt to lay bare the hidden or underlying reality connecting material phenomena as 'metaphysical' and 'abstract'

<sup>1</sup>See for example A. Besant, Modern Socialism, G.B. Shaw, "Karl Marx and Das Kapital," G. Wallas, "An Economic Eirenicon," Clarke and Bland, who both held Hegel in high regard, presumably would not have had these objections to Marx. For their attitudes toward Hegel see W. Clarke, "The Limits of Collectivism," and H. Bland, "Hegel's Theory of State," in Essays by Hubert Bland.

<sup>2</sup>S. Webb, "Rent, Interest and Wages," p. 4.

<sup>3</sup>G.B. Shaw, "Early Days," pp. 7-8.

clearly arose out of a largely unquestioning acceptance of the legitimacy of the positive method of science. Reality for the Fabians was directly observable in the world of empirical phenomena. The scientific truth which arose out of and which was tested by the application of analytical methods to empirically derived facts was the sole source of knowledge. The Fabians saw science as a source of knowledge independent of empirical phenomena and socially defined values and thus regarded Marx's attempt to connect phenomena through their 'inner meanings' as unscientific and therefore illegitimate. Their own concern was with observable, tangible institutions and it is clear that they regarded this world of 'external' phenomena as the sole object of legitimate study.<sup>1</sup>

Superimposed upon this generally expressed impatience with Marx's style and method of dialectical inquiry, there was a pronounced tendency

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<sup>1</sup>The most coherent examination of Marxist methodology is to be found in the Webbs' The Methods of Social Study (one of their later works) in which is made plain their attachment to a method involving a study of the world of 'external' phenomena, rather than to one which attempted to penetrate and examine the underlying reality which explained that world. In an extended footnote on the materialist conception of history, the Webbs argued that Marx had imposed a transcendental pattern on social facts; the materialist conception of history "was not a purely objective analysis of the phenomena of the external world" but went beyond the world of external appearances to the "idea" underlying and conditioning the whole evolutionary process." They accepted the materialist conception of history "merely as one hypothesis among many ... which appears to describe some of the phenomena of social evolution ... but not others." As an hypothesis, it might be "useful as an instrument of investigation" but it acquired scientific value "only in so far as it is verified by objective observation of the facts." The Methods of Social Study (Cambridge, 1975), p. 14. For a detailed consideration of scientism and Marxism see P. Thomas, "Marx and Science,"



to regard Marxism as a rigid dogma. This attitude was undoubtedly due in large measure to a confusion between Marx's ideas and the bitter sectarianism of the Social Democratic Federation. Pease, in an account of the Fabian attitude toward Marx, referred contemptuously to Marxism as "orthodoxy" with "Das Kapital, Vol. I," as "its Bible."<sup>1</sup> "The Fabians," Pease wrote, "refused to regard as articles of faith either the economic and historic analyses which Marx made use of or the political evolution which he predicted."<sup>2</sup>

Many of the Fabians found Marx's materialism and emphasis on class-struggle offensive to their moral sensibilities. Wallas regarded Marxism as "destructive" and "negativist."<sup>3</sup> Olivier, who had been deeply influenced by Positivism and who tended to see Socialism in terms of social co-operation and brotherhood, argued that:

it is ridiculous to rely upon a work of the nature of Marx's Capital (for spreading Socialist principles). I am not acquainted with any of the Socialist writings of Marx. Capital, as far as it goes, and the other fragments of his writings which are accessible to English readers are, in their practical application, merely anti-capitalist polemics. They do not teach Socialism.<sup>4</sup>

He accused the Social Democratic Federation of making "disgraceful

<sup>1</sup>E. Pease, The History of the Fabian Society, pp. 237, 236.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 237. My emphasis.

<sup>3</sup>Quoted by H.G. Wells, in Literary Guide and Rationalist Review, Sept., 1932.

<sup>4</sup>S. Olivier, "Perverse Socialism," To-Day, August, 1886.

appeals to the stomach."<sup>1</sup> The rhetoric of class war, he argued, appealed to wrath, jealousy and greed. "You cannot," Olivier declared, "make the Revolution with men whom you win by such means."<sup>2</sup>

Wallas suggested that the Fabians also regarded Marx as a crude and rigid determinist who seemed to deny the necessity for self-disciplined and dedicated work. He recalled,

We never believed in an inevitable, automatic and 'scientific' process by which a social revolution would come of itself. That theory is apt to present itself to the young reformer as a reason why he should trust to his own automatic impulses, should read and think such eloquences as comes from the exaltation of the moment, and should attend committees as long as they interest him. During ten years of constant intimacy we learnt ... that one could only get things done in politics by a steady and severe effort of will.<sup>3</sup>

If the Fabians misunderstood Marx, thinking that he treated the advent of social revolution as a fatalistic necessity rather than as a task requiring 'steady effort of will,' they also failed to see the complexity of historical materialism. They thought it a monocausal interpretation and unacceptable upon that account. They believed that Marx sought to reduce all historical causes to economic motivation. Wallas, recalling the debates at the Hampstead Historic Club, said that the Fabians' interest in history "made us from the first reject

<sup>1</sup>S. Olivier, "Perverse Socialism,"

<sup>2</sup>S. Olivier, "A Champion of the Perverse."

<sup>3</sup>G. Wallas, Men and Ideas, p. 105.

the Marxist 'economic interpretation of history' - the narrow and mechanical reference of all human actions and motives."<sup>1</sup>

Whilst these predilections and misunderstandings were important to the shaping of the general Fabian attitude towards Marxism, the sharp difference as to the mechanism of social change proceeded from a fundamentally different assumption about the nature of society, and clearly arose out of the Fabian attachment to the positive method of social science. For Marx the driving force of social change and social progress was the antagonistic social relationships which arose out of what Lichtheim called "the primary datum" of the real life process to produce and reproduce the conditions of material existence.<sup>2</sup> The Fabians acknowledged the predisposition of capitalist society to class conflict, but did not see class conflict as a primary dynamic of social change. For the Fabians social relationships arose out of institutional rather than productive processes, and for this reason there stood between Marx and the Fabians an unbridgeable gulf of a fundamental difference in outlook.

From their evolutionary studies the Fabians had evinced a belief that the organic development of their primary data of social institutions was toward collectivism. Thus Sidney Webb stressed that, "the essential contribution of the century to sociology has been the supersession of the Individual by the Community as the starting point

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<sup>1</sup>G. Wallas, Men and Ideas, p. 105. Webb had made a similar criticism of Marxian economics, "it ignored all the present facts of society, starting from premises of assured primordial and necessary elements in human nature only." "On Economic Method."

<sup>2</sup>G. Lichtheim, From Marx to Hegel (London, 1971), p. 72.

of social investigation. Socialism is the product of this development, arising with it from the contemporary industrial evolution."<sup>1</sup> The connecting characteristic between the primary data was an organic trend toward collectivism rather than class conflict; and these organic changes which Webb detected within social institutions evoked a vision of the struggle for socialism in which the battle lines were drawn not primarily as between proletarians and bourgeoisie but as between the forces of collectivism and the forces of individualism.

The political conflicts of the near future will necessarily take place between the party representing property and economic privilege on the one hand, and the party of the wage-earners on the other. The fundamental principle of the one will be Individualism; that of the other will be Collectivism. To the former must naturally belong not only the mass of the propertied class, capitalists as well as landlords, but also all those who fear that, in the aim at greater social comfort, there is danger of impairing the free play of mind and individual initiative upon which social progress ultimately depends. On the other side will be found those who see in well-organized social arrangements the only chance of securing that very individual development and free initiative to more than a small fraction of the community.<sup>2</sup>

The organic context of the struggle was thus located within each individual social institution, with collectivist forces cutting across class lines such that, "the gradual growth of Socialism is now seen to

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<sup>1</sup>S. Webb, Socialism in England, pp. 9-10.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. xxi.



be by vertical instead of horizontal expansion."<sup>1</sup>

The theory of consciousness, which was tangential to the view of class conflict in both Marxist and Fabian theory, also marked a distinctive difference between the Fabian and the Marxist approach. For Marx capitalism was the subordination of the proletarian class to the bourgeoisie, and bourgeois ideology served only to secure Labour's continued exploitation by Capital through the mystification of this fact. Marx believed that in the real life process of working class struggle the working class could come to reject bourgeois reality and develop a consciousness of the true direction of their own interests. Only the working class could bring about Socialism, and to this extent Socialism as an idea became a revolutionary force as it was adopted by the masses. While the Fabians accepted that class conflict provided fruitful ground for Socialist propaganda, their rejection of the notion of the dynamic role of class conflict, (which involved a denial that the working class alone was the midwife of Socialism) implied a rejection of the notion that class struggle in itself transformed Socialism from a social idea into a social force. Not only was the day to day economic struggle of the working class not an end in itself, but also it was not 'constructive.' In Bland's words, "The revolt of the empty stomach ends in the baker's shop."<sup>2</sup>

With the evolving tendency to collectivism enlisting volunteers

<sup>1</sup>S. Webb, Socialism in England, p. 7.

<sup>2</sup>H. Bland, "The Socialist Party in Relation to Politics."

across the line which divided the classes, the Fabians saw the role of Socialist ideas as providing a practical means whereby the obstacles to the collectivist trend could be removed. If for Marx Socialist ideas were to be a hammer in the hands of proletarians, they were for the Fabians to be tools in the hands of technicians.

"The Fabian Society," said Webb, "investigates the particular evils of society and seeks a remedy for each in accordance with the principles of Socialism."<sup>1</sup> This compartmentalization was a feature of their institutional outlook, and their particularizing approach<sup>2</sup> stood in stark distinction to a critique which simultaneously incorporated the multifarious defects of capitalist society. Thus whilst the Fabians accepted class conflict as a social fact, their analytical approach inclined them to see it as a manifestation of a particular social problem and to relate it to particular institutional defects which impeded the progress of collectivist solutions. As putative scientists the Webbs in particular were suspicious of an approach which did not appear to proceed from the particular to the general.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>S. Webb, "The Fabian Society: Its Objects and Methods."

<sup>2</sup>cf. S. Webb, "The Difficulties of Individualism," Fabian Tract No. 69. "We have learnt to think of social institutions and economic relations as much the subjects of constant change and evolution as any biological organism ... Whatever we may think of the existing social order, one thing is certain - namely that it will undergo modification ... In the present phase of actue social compunction, the maladjustments which occasion these modifications appear to us in the guise of 'social problems.'"

<sup>3</sup>See S. and B. Webb, The Methods of Social Study, p. 39.

The Fabians studied Marx when they were still under the influence of Comte and the Positivists, and before many of them had declared themselves for Socialism. They emerged from that study of Marx possessed with what they had hitherto lacked, a cogent theory of capitalist exploitation, the quaesitum of any socialist theory. Although approving of Marx's factual indictment of capitalism the Fabians rejected the Marxist methodology; but the study of Marx led the Fabians to a theory of economic exploitation based upon surplus value. The Fabians (correctly) maintained that surplus value did not depend on the labour theory of value, and substituted marginalist value theory in support of a theory of economic exploitation based upon rent. Webb's attachment to abstract economics led him to a distributive theory which regarded economic wages not only as a datum line to which all incomes not able to command rent in one form or other tended, but as an amount which was fixed or determined. Not until Webb had abandoned abstract economics in the mid 1890's did he emphasise the scope for trade union activity in respect of income distribution. Prior to his abandonment of abstract economics Webb's emphasis was upon the role of collective regulation as the principle means of ensuring that the working class enjoyed some of the fruits of the surplus value their labour had helped to create. Without collectivist intervention Webb noted that "the earth may be the Lord's, but the fullness thereof will be the landlords."<sup>1</sup>

Shaw attributed the Fabians' shift away from "old abstract deductive economics" to "modern historical economics" to a series of lectures on the Chartist Movement which Graham Wallas gave to

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<sup>1</sup>S. Webb, "Wages and the Remainder of the Economic Product", p. 73.

the Society in 1888.<sup>1</sup> However, the lectures do not appear to contain the methodological innovation Shaw claimed for them.

The cloudburst of industrial unrest and the emergence of the 'New Unionism' (whose outlook was concentrated on immediate 'bread and butter' issues) as a stable and recognized power together with the increase in real living standards especially in the two booms of the early 1890's confronted the Fabians with the necessity to rethink their attitudes toward trade unions. In this respect, the entry of Beatrice Webb, whose interest in trade unionism was already established, was a considerable stimulus.

Beatrice had undertaken her own independent study of economic  
<sup>2</sup> theory. Her study brought her to the conclusion that both classical and Marxian economics were fundamentally incorrect and unrealistic in their approach to the study of social facts.

Political Economy, as professed and taught, deals with only one of the many social institutions engaged in or concerned with wealth production; and it is misleading to ignore those other social institutions by which wealth has been, and is now being produced among hundreds of millions of people unacquainted with the 'big business' or profit-making capitalism, for which Ricardo sought to formulate the 'laws' that his successors have been, during the past century, so diligently refining and elaborating. <sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> G.B. Shaw, Appendix to Pease, Op. Cit., p. 277.

<sup>2</sup> During this time Beatrice wrote two essays on economic theory, "The History of English Economics", and "The Economic Theory of Karl Marx." For the background to these papers see p. 77 above.

<sup>3</sup> B. Webb, My Apprenticeship (second edition), p. 374. Beatrice's frontal attack on abstract deductive economics and her determination to subordinate political economy to a branch of sociology indicated a considerable Positivist influence. See above pp. 77-79.



What was needed, Beatrice advised, was a study of social institutions as they actually exist...whatever may be the assumed object or purpose with which these institutions are established or maintained."<sup>1</sup> Such a "change of the definition of the sphere of...Economics" would, she claimed, have important advantages. It would "involve the abandonment of the abstract, or purely deductive method."<sup>2</sup> What would be described and analyzed were social institutions and "not any assumed 'laws', unchanging and ubiquitous, comparable with the laws of gravity, any failure of correspondence with the facts being dismissed as friction."<sup>3</sup> Another advantage would be that social institutions would "have to be studied, not in any assumed perfect development, but in all the changing phases of growing social tissue, from embryo to corpse, in health and perversion, in short, as the birth, growth, disease and death of actual social relationships."<sup>4</sup>

When Beatrice married Sidney Webb, the first problems the partnership investigated were the ones already begun or projected by Beatrice. Her study of classical and Marxian economics and her subsequent critique of Political Economy and formulation of the functions and methods of social science were important factors in turning the Society away from the old abstract economics to modern historical concrete economics. As Shaw said,

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<sup>1</sup>B. Webb, My Apprenticeship, p. 374.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 374-375.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 375.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., pp. 375-376.

A comparison of my exposition of the law of rent in my first Fabian Essay and in my Impossibilities of Anarchism with the Webb's great Histories of Trade Unionism and of Industrial Democracy will illustrate the difference between the two schools. 1

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<sup>1</sup>G.B. Shaw, Appendix to Pease, Op. Cit., p. 277.

## JOHN STUART MILL AND FABIANISM

Many scholars and historians have held that John Stuart Mill had a crucial influence on Fabian thought. This view has been fostered by the interpretation of Mill's thought on state intervention which gained such wide currency in A.V. Dicey's 1905 Lectures Upon the Relation Between Law and Public Opinion in England in the Nineteenth Century. Dicey wrote:

The changes or fluctuations in Mill's own convictions bearing as they do in many points upon legislative opinions, are at once the sign and were in England, to a great extent, the cause, of the transition from the individualism of 1830-1865 to the collectivism of 1900. His teaching specially affected the men who were just entering on public life towards 1870. It prepared them at any rate to accept, if not to welcome the collectivism which from time onwards has gained increasing strength.<sup>1</sup>

Some few years later Sir Ernest Barker wrote that "It is Mill who serves, in the recent years between 1848 and 1880 as the bridge from laissez-faire to the idea of social readjustment by the State, and from political Radicalism to economic Socialism." Barker identified Mill as the "chief influence" on Fabianism, supplying the economic doctrine and serving as an inspiration from which "Fabianism began after 1884 to supply a new philosophy in place of Benthamite Individualism."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>A.V. Dicey, Lectures Upon the Relation Between Law and Opinion in England in the Nineteenth Century (London, 1905), p. 430.

<sup>2</sup>Sir Ernest Barker, Political Thought in England from Herbert Spencer to the Present Day (London, 1915), p. 215.

The idea that Mill was a formative influence on Fabian thought has been strengthened by Fabians themselves. Their writings are filled with references to John Stuart Mill and examples of their efforts to co-opt Mill for Socialism are numerous. Added to this general, but quite obvious, admiration for Mill was Bernard Shaw's claim that Sidney Webb, the leading spirit of the Fabian Society, was a disciple of Mill who followed him in converting to Socialism.<sup>1</sup>

Thus it has become the conventional view that the Fabians, and Webb in particular, were the inheritors of the tradition of Mill. G. Lichtheim stated with reference to the Fabians that "most of them were the intellectual heirs of Bentham and Mill."<sup>2</sup> While Adam B. Ulam in the Philosophical Foundations of English Socialism wrote: "The Fabians took themselves to be the continuers of the tradition of John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham. Some of their plans for reform bear a direct relationship to Mill's ideas during his last socialist phase."<sup>3</sup>

Mary Hamilton, a biographer of the Webbs, concluded of that famous partnership:

Their basis was the work of the Utilitarians, and above all, of John Stuart Mill... They have gone far beyond Mill, without ever wholly dispossessing themselves of his potent influence.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See George Bernard Shaw, "Bluffing the Value Theory," To-Day, May, 1889 and what Shaw had to say in Margaret Cole, The Webbs and Their Work (London, 1949), pp. 4, 6.

<sup>2</sup> George Lichtheim, A Short History of Socialism (London, 1970), p. 186.

<sup>3</sup> Adam B. Ulam, Philosophical Foundations of English Socialism (Cambridge, Mass, 1951), p. 73.

<sup>4</sup> Mary Hamilton, Sidney and Beatrice Webb (London, 1932), p. 166.



Joseph Clayton in The Rise and Decline of Socialism wrote of Webb's relationship to Mill:

Sidney Webb, from the start the master-mind in the Fabian Society, meant by Socialism something quite different from the Socialism of William Morris and H.M. Hyndman. John Stuart Mill, and not Karl Marx, was Webb's teacher and example ... In economics Webb all along rejected Marx and the Marxian theory of value and claimed that the orthodox economists were sufficient to bring mankind to Socialism.<sup>1</sup>

M. Beer, in A History of British Socialism also noted Webb's debt to Mill.

Webb stands on the shoulders of J.S. Mill. He is the direct mental descendant of the last great Utilitarian. He has taken up the work of socialism where Mill left it - namely, half-way between individualism and social reform, and has carried it a good distance further.<sup>2</sup>

This uncritical acceptance of Dicey's interpretation of Mill, and of Shaw's repeated assertion that Webb followed Mill's conversion to Socialism invites examination.

Dicey's Law and Opinion is at once an outstanding and misleading work, both scholarly and politically partisan. As H. Parris has noted, "Dicey's purpose was not only to describe the consequences of radical Liberalism, but also, as a whiggish exponent of the true Liberal faith,

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<sup>1</sup>Joseph Clayton, The Rise and Decline of Socialism (London, 1926), p. 43.

<sup>2</sup>M. Beer, A History of British Socialism (London, 1948), p. 28.

to denounce them."<sup>1</sup> Dicey, who was a firm advocate of the virtues of economic freedom, helped to perpetuate the myth that the period between 1830 and 1870 was an era of Benthamite individualism during which time the sphere of state activity in Great Britain was properly restricted, if not actually receding. Additionally he represented Mill as a transitional figure between radical liberalism and collectivism, whose social, philosophic and economic unorthodoxy ushered in an era of collectivist interventionism. The myth about nineteenth century government, which Dicey did so much to encourage, has since been exploded.<sup>2</sup> His picture of Mill as the man whose ideas were chiefly responsible for opening the flood gates to collectivism stands in need of re-examination.

If Dicey's view of Mill needs to be re-examined, so too does Shaw's assertion that Sidney Webb followed Mill's conversion to Socialism. Historians of socialism have been singularly uncritical in their acceptance of Shaw's characterisation of Webb, which owes its plausibility to Webb's evidently sincere admiration for Mill. However, there were greater differences between Mill and Webb than Shaw suggested. If the role of John Stuart Mill in the formation of Fabian

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<sup>1</sup>Henry Parris, "The Nineteenth-Century Revolution in Government: A Reappraisal Reappraised", The Historical Journal, III, I (1960), pp. 17-37. p. 18.

<sup>2</sup>See Henry Parris, Op. Cit. and Jenifer Hart, "Nineteenth-Century Social Reform: A Tory Interpretation of History", Past and Present, No. 31 (July 1965) pp. 39-61. For a more extreme corrective to Dicey see J.B. Brebner, "Laissez Faire and State Intervention in 19th Century Britain", Journal of Economic History, Supplement VIII (1948), pp. 59-73; also see L. Robbins, The Theory of Economic Policy in English Classical Political Economy (London, 1952).

thought is to be properly understood such differences should not be obscured.

There are many difficulties which obstruct the generally received view of the Fabian debt to John Stuart Mill. The first of these difficulties revolves around Mill's position on state intervention and the nature of his socialist beliefs. Most modern authorities are agreed that Mill advocated free enterprise as the general rule in economic affairs, while accepting that there were many situations where the state should intervene.<sup>1</sup> Mill was equivocal about proposing a general rule from which practical political, social and economic policy conclusions would be drawn, but his tentative was that: "Laissez-faire, in short, should be the general practice: every departure from it, unless required by some great good, is a certain evil."<sup>2</sup> Another statement of Mill's position is to be found in Auguste Comte and Positivism:

Believing with M. Comte that there are no absolute truths in the political art, nor indeed in any art whatever, we agree with him that the laissez-faire doctrine, stated without large qualifications, is both impractical and unscientific; but it does not follow that those who assert it are not, nineteen times out of twenty, practically nearer the truth than those who deny it.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See L. Robbins. The Theory of Economic Policy in the English Classical Economists, ; P. Schwartz, The New Political Economy of J.S. Mill (London 1968); J. Robson, The Improvement of Mankind (London 1968).

While Mill's adherence was to the least governance theory, he did not preclude positive and beneficial aspects of government activity. Indeed, Mill listed the places and circumstances in which government interference was beneficial,<sup>1</sup> and recognized that the growing network of social interactions increasingly necessitated an expanding sphere of legitimate government activity. In "Centralization" Mill conceded that there must be new laws to deal with new situations, and that as society progressed new legislation was required to protect both individuals and the public from injury.<sup>2</sup> However, Mill argued that the necessity for justification always lay on the side of interference and insisted that every act of government intervention should be specifically justified by its expedience in promoting social welfare. It is in this light that Mill's posthumous acknowledgment that he was a 'qualified socialist' needs to be examined.

In 1826 Mill experienced what he called a crisis in his mental history. In part this crisis was due to a recognition of the inadequacy of his Benthamite beliefs. He felt that his education had failed to instil in him the feelings of social sympathy. Thus, Mill wrote, "the whole foundation on which my life was constructed fell down."<sup>3</sup>

On the vacant lot Mill erected a modified structure of beliefs.

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<sup>1</sup> See J.S. Mill, Principles of Political Economy, book 5, Chap. 11, sections 9-16, in Collected Works (Toronto, 1965).

<sup>2</sup> See J.S. Mill, "Centralization", Edinburgh Review, CXV, April, 1861, pp. 323-58.

<sup>3</sup> J.S. Mill, Autobiography, ed. Jack Stillinger (London, 1971), p. 81.



I never, indeed, wavered in the conviction that happiness is the test of all rules of conduct, and the end of life. But I now thought that this end was only to be attained by not making it the direct end. Those only are happy (I thought) who have their minds fixed on some object other than their own happiness; on the happiness of others, on the improvement of mankind, even on some art or pursuit,<sup>1</sup> followed not as a means, but as itself an ideal end.

It was this which lay at the heart of Mill's socialist sympathies and opened his mind to the "influences of ... continental thought" which came "streaming in" on him, both from the Coleridgians and from the Saint-Simonians. Under these influences Mill's social and political thinking was redirected, and he came to accept, "That all questions of political institutions are relative, not absolute, and that different stages of human progress not only will have, but ought to have different institutions."<sup>2</sup> Thus he became convinced that the role of government in promoting progress changed with time and place and circumstance.

The degree in which political authority can justify and expediently interfere, either to control individuals and voluntary associations, to supersede them by doing their work for them, to guide and assist, or to invoke and draw forth their agency, varies not only with the wants of every country and age, and the kind of capabilities of every people, but with the special requirements of every kind of work to be done.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>J.S. Mill, Autobiography, ed. Jack Stillinger (London, 1971), pp. 85-6.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 97.

<sup>3</sup>J.S. Mill, "Centralization," p. 323.

Mill was also impressed by the Saint-Simonians' criticisms of laissez-faire, which were responsible for convincing him that "the old political economy, which assumes private property and inheritance as indefeasible facts, and freedom of production and exchange as the dernier mot of social improvement" was of "limited and temporary value."<sup>1</sup> Mill found the aim of the Saint-Simonians both "desirable and rational" and, while he "neither believed in the practicability, nor in the beneficial operation of their social machinery", he felt that "the proclamation of such an ideal human society could not but tend to give a beneficial direction to the efforts of others to bring society, as at present constituted, nearer to some ideal standard."<sup>2</sup>

Thus by the late twenties and early thirties Mill had come to accept both the possibility and the desirability of Socialism as the final goal in human progress.<sup>3</sup> However, Mill was never fully convinced that any of the socialist proposals put forward in his time would work well in practice, and this was the essence of his analysis of Socialism, both in the Principles of Political Economy and in the posthumous "Chapters on Socialism." Even in the third edition of the Principles, (in which "most of what had been written on the subject in the first edition was cancelled, and replaced by arguments and reflections of a

<sup>1</sup>J.S. Mill, Autobiography, p. 100.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid. pp. 100-101.

<sup>3</sup>There has been considerable argument about the influence of Harriet Taylor. Whilst she no doubt encouraged Mill's socialist sympathies, these sympathies were too long standing to have been due solely to her influence. Concerning the importance of Harriet Taylor to Mill's thought see F. Hayek, John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor (London, 1951). Michael Packe, The Life of John Stuart Mill (London, 1954). For a challenge to this view see J. Stillinger's, Early Draft of Mill's Autobiography (Urbana, 1961); H.O. Pappe, John Stuart Mill and the Harriet Taylor Myth (London, 1960); F. Mineka, "The Autobiography and the Lady," University of Toronto Quarterly, 32, 1963, pp. 301-306; also see J. Robson, The Improvement of Mankind,

decidedly socialistic tendency"),<sup>1</sup> there was never an unqualified acceptance of any socialist schemes.

Mill looked to a society in which there would be social harmony, in which demoralising master and servant relationships and conflict between the propertied classes and the propertyless would have been eliminated. Such, in its outlines, were the reasons that Mill placed himself and his wife under the "general designation of Socialists.":

... our ideal of ultimate improvement went far beyond Democracy, and would class us decidedly under the general designation of Socialists. While we repudiated with the greatest energy that tyranny of society over the individual which most Socialistic systems are supposed to involve, we yet looked forward to a time when society will no longer be divided into the idle and the industrious; when the rule that they who do not work shall not eat, will be applied not to paupers only, but impartially to all; when the division of the produce of labour, instead of depending, as in so great a degree it now does, on the accident of birth, will be made by concert, on an acknowledged principle of justice; and when it will no longer either be, or be thought to be, impossible for human beings to exert themselves to be exclusively their own, but to be shared with the society they belong to. The social problem of the future we considered to be, how to unite the greatest individual liberty of action, with a common ownership in the raw material of the globe, and an equal participation of all in the benefits of combined labour. We had not the presumption to suppose that we could already foresee, by what precise form of institutions these objects could most effectually be attained, or at how near or how distant a period they would become practicable.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> J.S. Mill, Early Draft of John Stuart Mill's Autobiography, ed. J. Stillinger, (Urbans, 1961), p. 174. In the final version, the phrase: "which represent a more advanced opinion" is substituted for the last six words. J.S. Mill, Autobiography, p. 140.

<sup>2</sup> J.S. Mill, Autobiography, p. 138.

While Mill had strong socialist sympathies, any attempt to imply centralized collectivism into his ideas would be mistaken. As the posthumous "Chapters on Socialism" made clear, Mill repudiated state socialism and the idea of efficiency and order through centralization.<sup>1</sup> His approval of socialist schemes extended to those that depended on voluntary organization in small associations or communities.

Encouraged by the unofficial co-operative experiments carried out in the early days of the Second French Republic, Mill began to look to the improvement of mankind along co-operative lines. In the third edition of the Principles he inserted in the chapter "On The Probable Futurity of the Labouring Classes" a new section on co-operation.

The form of association ... which, if mankind continue to improve, must be expected in the end to predominate, is not that which can exist between a capitalist as chief, and workpeople without a voice in the management, but the association of the labourers themselves on terms of equality, collectively owning the capital with which they carry on their operations, and working under managers elected and removable by themselves.<sup>2</sup>

"In that chapter," as Lord Robbins said,

it is clear that Mill's utopia is not nearly so much in the duo-decimo editions of the new Jerusalem ... but in the development of workmen's co-operatives ...

<sup>1</sup>See especially his claim that the "idea of conducting the whole industry of the country ... from a single centre is so obviously chimerical that nobody ventures to propose (how) ... it should be done." J.S. Mill, "Chapters on Socialism" Fortnightly Review Vol. XXV (n.s.), 1879. Reprinted, Essays on Economics and Society ed. J.M. Robson (Toronto, 1967) p. 748.

<sup>2</sup>J.S. Mill, Principles, p. 133.



In the last analysis, that is to say, Mill's socialism proves to be much more like non-revolutionary syndicalism than anything which would be called socialism at the present day.<sup>1</sup>

Mill's sympathy with socialism understood as a kind of non-revolutionary syndicalism, stood in marked contrast to the Fabians antipathy for co-operative production under workers' control. From the late 1880's Webb opposed the idea of co-operative production as a "seductive means of escape."<sup>2</sup> While he conceded that it "might improve the relations between the capitalist and the labourer,"<sup>3</sup> and "affords a valuable moral training ground,"<sup>4</sup> he insisted that:

No amount of progress in mere voluntary co-operation can get rid of the economic tribute to the present possessors of the means of production - land and industrial capital - or their heirs and assigns.<sup>5</sup>

Beatrice Potter Webb's early study of the history of the self-governing workshop deepened the Fabians' prejudice against the idea of workers' control in industry. From her study of the Co-operative Movement Beatrice concluded that the control of industry by the workers could not succeed. Self-governing workshops could provide neither the

<sup>1</sup> Lord Robbins, Introduction to Essays on Economics and Society, p. xl.

<sup>2</sup> S. Webb, Socialism in England, p. 91. Also see The Progress of Socialism, The Hampstead Society for the Study of Socialism Tract No. 1 (London, 1888); "The Economic Limits of Co-operation," The Co-operative News, Jan. 12, 1889, PP VI, 36.

<sup>3</sup> S. Webb, Socialism in England, p. 93.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 92.

<sup>5</sup> S. Webb, "The Economic Limits of Co-operation," ; see also Socialism in England, pp. 91-93.

managerial ability, nor the knowledge of the market, nor the workshop discipline necessary for efficient production. Either the self-governing workshop failed, or it ceased to be self-governing.<sup>1</sup>

In their tracts, articles and books in the middle and late nineties, the Fabians insisted on the need for community control, as opposed to control by particular groups of workers over their own industry.<sup>2</sup> The idea of co-operative production under workers' control Webb called "Trade Sectionalism." He described it as an "insidious form of Spurious Collectivism ... which makes, consciously or unconsciously, the trade and not the community the unit of administration."<sup>3</sup> The self-governing workshop was, Webb insisted, "diametrically opposed to the Socialist ideal."

The associated craftsmen produce entirely with a view to their own profit. The community obtains no more control over their industry than over an individual employer.<sup>4</sup>

If one of the difficulties of the received view of the Fabian debt to Mill is the opposition between Mill's view of socialism as non-revolutionary syndicalism and the Fabian's repudiation of workers' control, another is their conflicting views on liberty. Against Mill's negative commonsense concept of liberty the Fabians held a rational, Platonic view.

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<sup>1</sup>B. Potter, The Co-operative Movement in Great Britain (London, 1891), Chap. v.

<sup>2</sup>See W. Clarke, "Limits of Collectivism," Contemporary Review, Feb. 1893; Tracts 51 and 70; S. and B. Webb, History of Trade Unionism (London, 1894), pp. 145-8.

<sup>3</sup>S. Webb, "Socialism: True and False", Fabian Tract No. 51, p. 12.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 15.

John Stuart Mill's essay On Liberty has traditionally been regarded as a defence of individual liberty and a classic exposition of the negative concept of freedom.<sup>1</sup> "The object of this Essay" Mill wrote,

is to assert one very simple principle ... that the sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number is self-protection ... to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant ... the only part of conduct of anyone, for which he is amenable to society is that which concerns others. In the part which merely concerns himself, his independence is, of right absolute.<sup>2</sup>

In the final chapter, where Mill <sup>gave</sup> examples for the practical application of the principle of liberty, he restated that principle:

The two maxims which together form the entire doctrine of this Essay ... are, first, that the individual is not accountable to society for his actions, in so far as they concern the interests of no person but himself ... Secondly, that for such actions as are prejudicial to the interests of others, the individual is accountable, and may be subjected either to social or legal punishment, if society is of opinion that the one or the other is requisite for its protection.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Until quite recently neither critics nor admirers have doubted that On Liberty is a defence of individual liberty. This traditional viewpoint was questioned by the publication of Maurice Cowling's Mill and Liberalism (Cambridge, 1963) in which it was stated that On Liberty was "designed to detract from human freedom, not to maximize it." Cowling maintains that the individuality that Mill asserts is a highly selective one. "On Liberty does not offer safeguards for individuality, it is designed to propagate the individuality of the elevated by protecting them against the mediocrity of opinion as a whole." However, Cowling's argument contains many flaws and is on the whole unconvincing. For critical appraisals of Cowling see John Rees, "Was Mill for Liberty?", Political Studies Vol. XIV, Feb. 1966 and C.L. Ten "Mill and Liberty", Journal of the History of Ideas, Vol. XXX, 1969. The traditional view of On Liberty as an expression of the case for liberty and individual freedom is, I think, fundamentally correct.

<sup>2</sup>J.S. Mill, On Liberty, (Oxford, 1946), p. 8.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 84.

Liberty, was for Mill, the absence of external coercion, and an individual was said to be free to the degree to which no other individual or the state prevented or interfered with his activity. Liberty in this sense was simply the area within which an individual could act unhindered by other individuals or the state.

This meaning of liberty was very much in the empiricist tradition. The degree of freedom could only be determined by observing an individual's relation to other individuals and the state. It was their actions which were free, or not free; and the determination of freedom of actions was by observing relations with the external world. Thus freedom was an empirical question.

Sidney Webb's concept of liberty, which stood in marked contrast to Mill's, was given fullest expression in a lecture entitled "Rome: A Sermon in Sociology."<sup>1</sup> The lecture consisted of an outline of the essential characteristics of the last period of the Roman state, and the important ideas and lessons that Socialists could derive from it.

Webb described Rome's great contribution to the Socialist ideal thus:

To secure the ultimate welfare of the City, the Roman gave up his personal freedom, his individual independence, his health, and where necessary, even his sacred family isolation. In every age the individual is ruthlessly sacrificed to the mass, and the whole generation to the commonweal. The question is not whether such and such institutions promote freedom or happiness,

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<sup>1</sup>S. Webb, "Rome: A Sermon in Sociology", Our Corner, Vol. XII, July 1, 1888, pp. 53-60; Aug. 1, 1888, pp. 79-89. Also see "Historic", Fabian Essays, Socialism in England; "Considerations on Anarchism" PP VI, 18.



but whether they benefit the Republic ... The supreme devotion has been a beacon light to all the successive ages, and is beyond all question our most important heritage from Rome.<sup>1</sup>

In Rome,

the might of the State as a whole, so long as public opinion supported it, was cramped by no regard for individual rights and fettered by no restrictive laws for the sake of personal liberty. For them the individual existed but as the member of the community, and as such, without rights opposed to those of the community. The very notion of individual claims against state welfare was utterly foreign to the Roman mind.<sup>2</sup>

The essence of liberty for the Roman was, Webb asserted, "freedom to choose your laws and your law givers - not inconsistent with the most rigid subjection to them when once chosen. Liberty, in the sense of freedom from the law or restraint was to him immoral licentiousness, displeasing to the Gods and injurious to the State."<sup>3</sup> It was this concept of liberty Webb declared, that was Rome's great contribution to the world. "The special lesson which Rome bears to the world is the necessity to that higher type of universal reign of law in society ... Freedom is choice of, not absence, of rule."<sup>4</sup>

Thus in contradistinction to Mill, freedom for Webb was the choice of rule rather than its absence. Fullest freedom was found in the rational acceptance of laws and regulations that were for the public good.

<sup>1</sup>S. Webb, "Rome: A Sermon in Sociology", Our Corner, Vol XII, July 1, 1888, p. 60.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 84.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 88.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 89.

Webb explained that men could achieve this state of freedom only when they had liberated themselves from slavery to their own nature. Thus he identified two 'selves'; a higher self identified with reason, and a lower self which pursued immediate pleasure. Only when the higher self dominated were men liberated from savagery. "This sacrifice of present momentary enjoyment," Webb wrote, "to future and more permanent pleasures, distinguishes them at once from savages and from the finished product of an individualistic civilization."<sup>1</sup> The higher self, must, Webb argued, be rigidly disciplined.

The perfectly free man is he whose impulses issue into action untrammelled by rules, even rules of thought ... But the perfectly socialized man puts constraint upon himself in every direction; a free mind is what he never enjoys; the more permanent element of the Ego stands ever ready as a watchful guardian, remorselessly checking and strangling those monstrous births and strange abortions which all minds bear, but only foolish or bad minds bring to light.<sup>2</sup>

Thus liberty was to be found in the conquering of impulse and the conforming to a higher ideal character judged to be of the higher value.

This higher self transcended the individual, and was part of the social whole. The individual became coextensive with the race; with all generations past and future. Not only must there be subordination of "the momentary impulse to the permanent will, the present to the future" but also "the individual to the mass, the generation to the race."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>S. Webb, "Rome: A Sermon in Sociology", p. 82.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 83.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 89.

If the higher self was identified with the social whole then "self-devotion and subordination to the race"<sup>1</sup> achieved not only the "higher end of the Commonweal"<sup>2</sup> but also the freedom of the individual.

Webb's views invite comparison with those of the Oxford Idealist and sometime Fabian D.G. Ritchie. Ritchie's discussion of the obligations of the citizen to the state was very similar to Webb's.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the arguments of Ritchie's Darwinism and Politics had won him a footnote in Webb's contribution to Fabian Essays.<sup>4</sup>

It is probable, however, that the similarity in views was a matter of form rather than substance. Ritchie's doctrine derived from an amalgam of Hegel and Darwin. Ritchie read into Darwin's theory of evolution a scientific confirmation of Hegel's theory of history, and saw in Hegel's philosophy a guide for drawing correct political conclusions from Darwin's discoveries.<sup>5</sup> Webb, however, as a comment on the "bewildering German metaphysicians" suggests, was out of sympathy with Hegel.<sup>6</sup> That Webb, the great literary opportunist, did not, with the exception of one reference to Ritchie (he was a

<sup>1</sup>S. Webb, "Rome: A Sermon in Sociology", p. 79.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 88.

<sup>3</sup>D.G. Ritchie, Darwinism and Politics (London, 1889) and The Principles of State Interference (London, 1891). Ritchie's Darwinism and Politics, published six months before Fabian Essays, was originally presented as lectures to the Fabian Society in the summer of 1888. For the most recent study of the influences of the Oxford Idealists on Fabian thought see, Wolfe, From Radicalism to Socialism, While Wolfe correctly traces idealist influences to Ritchie rather than the older generation of T.H. Green, he tends to over estimate the extent of that influence.

<sup>4</sup>S. Webb, "Historic" Fabian Essays, p. 57.

<sup>5</sup>For a recent commentary on Ritchie see S.R. Letwin, The Pursuit of Certainty (Cambridge, 1965), pp. 340-41.

<sup>6</sup>S. Webb, part of a lecture London Workingmen's College, c. 1883, PP, VI, 9, p. 10.

fellow Fabian) appeal to the authority of the Idealists, perhaps suggests that he regarded Idealism as uncongenial to the English mind. In fact, Webb had arrived at conclusions similar to Ritchie's without an appeal to Hegel.

Ritchie's synthesis of evolutionary organicism and politics served to reinforce rather than to inspire Webb's beliefs. Indeed, it was the attempt to draw proper political lessons from biological principles that lay at the core of both Webb's and Ritchie's doctrines. This was the burden of their attack on Mill's negative concept of freedom.

In one of Webb's earliest lectures, "The New Learning of the Nineteenth Century", he noted that John Stuart Mill knew very little about natural science and about "biology in particular still less." Mill's "psychology, his Ethics, and above all his Metaphysics ..." Webb argued, "want correcting by later ideas." The most important of these ideas was "Evolution, including ... so many great laws of Biology, and in particular the idea of heredity."<sup>1</sup> Thus with the aid of Spencer and Darwin, Webb determined to correct Mill.

The importance of the "great strides" which biology had made toward a theory of heredity, Webb argued in his lecture "Heredity as a Factor in Psychology and Ethics", was "not so much in the facts which science inductively demonstrates, as in the theories in which the facts are summed up, and in the new light thrown upon other facts by the deductive application of the theories."<sup>2</sup> It was evident, Webb

<sup>1</sup>S. Webb, "The New Learning of the Nineteenth Century", pp. 11-12.

<sup>2</sup>S. Webb, "Heredity as a Factor in Psychology and Ethics", Lecture to the Zetetical Society, March 22, 1882, PP, VI, 5, p. 2.



continued, that the recognition of the importance of the laws of heredity would profoundly influence sociological thinking.

To refer only to that question which at present blocks the way at the threshold of the science ... I mean that of the Proper Sphere of Government. A closer examination of the problem aided by Heredity I think will necessitate a complete change of front of both the contending parties. It has hitherto been admitted, almost as a self-evident axiom, that the question was to be decided by what I may call the immediate incidence of an action. Nearly every thinker on the subject has been willing to concede that with actions which affected only the individual actor, purely self-regarding actions, Government has no business. In applying this axiom to practical politics, almost everybody has considered only the immediate consequences of the action, and following the lead of Humbolt and John Mill, advanced liberals have generally gone to such an extreme of liberty as has unfortunately caused them to be separated by a great gulf from the practical politicians who have to work the government machine, and on whom they might have had an important influence for good.<sup>1</sup>

However, Webb argued, if the universality of heredity was accepted then "there is no such thing as a purely self-regarding action and the fundamental axiom and world moving lever of the philosophical radicals becomes a mere scholastic fulmination of no immediate practical application."<sup>2</sup>

The lessons Webb drew from the theory of heredity were reinforced by his organic conception of society. "We must" Webb said, "abandon the self-conceit of imagining that we are independent units ... the obstinate 'will to live' an individual life ... is the survival of the brute in man."<sup>3</sup> Individuals were not independent beings, but parts of an organic whole. Thus,

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<sup>1</sup>S. Webb, *Heredity as a Factor in Psychology and Ethics*", pp. 24-25.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>3</sup>S. Webb, "Rome: A Sermon in Sociology", pp. 88, 89.

There are no purely self-regarding acts. Every act, even the seemingly most "morally indifferent", affects the universe for good or for evil, everlastingly, irreparably. Every act is, consequently, a matter of social concern.<sup>1</sup>

"The amount of individual liberty to do other than the right course, even in the so called most 'self regarding' acts, is," Webb declared, "a measure of society's ignorance." Freedom Webb argued, was found in the rational acceptance of laws, through an internalization of the "social instinct embodied in the law."<sup>2</sup> Freedom, so far from being incompatible with authority, was virtually identical with it.

Bernard Shaw developed a similar critique of Mill's negative concept of liberty. In an unpublished paper, which in a diary note of Oct. 1887, was referred to as "The New Radicalism", Shaw referred to the outdated principles of laissez-faire and individual liberty with their associated ideas of self-regarding actions.

Occasionally Mr. Leonard Courtney, or some obscurer politician who in a bygone paroxysm of self-culture has read Mill's Essay on Liberty, rises to protest that "self-regarding actions" should not be interfered with, and is greeted with a cheer from some belated amateur of Manchester economics, who was taught in his youth to believe that government must not meddle with industry, and who fears that the world has been going mad ever since. But "self-regarding actions" and the notion that two such vital organs as the industrial and governmental can act independently in the body politic, have gone the way of other superstitions.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>S. Webb, "Considerations on Anarchism," pp VI, 18.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>G.B. Shaw, "The New Radicalism" (1887), reprinted in L. Crompton, ed., The Road to Equality (Boston, 1971), p. 20.

The following year, Shaw wrote another paper, under the title of "Socialism and Property", in which he discussed the notion that individuals have an absolute freedom of action in so far as their actions affect only themselves. This concept of freedom, Shaw argued, was a "barren one."

It passed for something when men believed that there were certain actions, called "self-regarding," which affected only the person performing them. But the minute division of labor in modern communities with the consequent interdependence of the individuals forming it; the extension of sanitary science and of the knowledge of heredity; the pressure upon space in modern cities and the complexity of the organization needed to subsist their huge populations, have swept away the "self-regarding action" into the limbo of decaying superstitions. There is no conceivable human action of which it can now be confidently affirmed that it will affect no one except the agent, or that the agent's freedom to do it will "infringe not the equal freedom of any other man." Consequently "freedom" in this sense may be dismissed as a mere dialectical figment, of which the very expositions - Stuart Mill's *Essay on Liberty* and Mr. Spencer's *Social Statics*, for example - are now patent reductions to absurdity. Theoretically, since there are no indifferent actions, there is for every man a rigid line of conduct from which he cannot swerve one hair's breadth in the minutest detail without injury to the community; and if the community could ascertain that line it would be justified in compelling him to keep to that line, to the entire abolition of his "freedom." Conscientious educated men seek the guidance of that line throughout their lives, and never for a moment think of themselves as free agents.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>G.B. Shaw, "Socialism and Property" (1888), reprinted as "Freedom and the State" in Crompton, The Road to Equality, pp. 38-39. Compare the last two sentences with Webb's statement, "We may believe that in any given circumstances, one course, if we only knew which, would produce more social happiness than any other course: would be, in fact, more scientifically correct; in short, the only Right course." "Considerations on Anarchism,"

Ritchie also censured Mill for thinking of liberty in the negative sense of 'being left to oneself'. In The Principles of State Interference Ritchie argued that Mill's 'individual' was too abstract. The individual, Ritchie maintained, found his true self "not in distinction and separation from others, but in community with them."

We may very well doubt whether any acts, nay, even thoughts, of the individual can, in the strictest sense, be merely self-regarding and so a matter of indifference to other individuals. The more we learn of human society, the more we discover that there are no absolute divisions, but that every atom influences and is influenced by every other. It may be very inexpedient to meddle with particular acts, or it may be practically impossible to do so; but we can lay down no hard and fast line separating self-regarding acts from acts which affect others.<sup>1</sup>

Inviolable frontiers of individual freedom which the state should never cross could only be established, as John Stuart Mill saw, for actions which were completely self-regarding. The Fabians maintained that such actions were not only impossible to find but were irrelevant to the condition of freedom. "The state has as its end, the realisation of the best life of the individual."<sup>2</sup> The state was a social whole of which the individual was a part. All that was best in man was created by the state: "the state is not a mere means to individual welfare as an end; in a way, the state is an end in itself."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>D.G. Ritchie, The Principles of State Interference, pp. 96-98.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 102.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.



The individual must be prepared "to take with understanding, with sympathy and humbleness his or her place in the great organism of a state where each shares with full consciousness the common purpose and where each attains the common end."<sup>1</sup> In yielding to the whole, the individual realized his highest capacities, for "the perfect and fitting development of each individual" consisted in filling" in the best possible way, of his humble function in the great social machine."<sup>2</sup>

Despite these discontinuities between J.S. Mill and the Fabians, Shaw was alone in seeing them as significant. Thus in response to Sir Ernest Barker's contention that Mill had served as a bridge from political radicalism to economic socialism, Shaw wrote:

Far from being the economic apostle of Socialism, Mill, in the days when the Fabian Society took the field, was regarded as the standard authority for solving the social problem by a combination of peasant proprietorship with neo-Malthusianism. The Dialectical Society, which was a centre of the most advanced thought in London until the Fabian Society supplanted it, was founded to advocate the principles of Mill's *Essay on Liberty*, which was much more the Bible of English Individualism than *Das Kapital* ever was of English Socialism.<sup>1</sup>

However, Shaw was an exception to the general rule among the major Fabians in being so unimpressed by Mill.

Sidney Webb's admiration for John Stuart Mill is well known. Webb's father was an active metropolitan Radical who had worked for Mill's election in the Parliamentary campaign of 1864.<sup>3</sup> No doubt

<sup>1</sup>G. Wallas, "Education", lecture, 1886, Wallas Papers.

<sup>2</sup>G.B. Shaw, Appendix to Pease, The History of the Fabian Society, p. 273.

<sup>3</sup>B. Webb, Our Partnership, p. 3; also see M. Hamilton Sidney and Beatrice Webb (London, 1932), pp. 1, 20.

much of the father's enthusiasm for Mill was transmitted to the young Webb, and his inherited intellectual tastes and interests were encouraged by the Radical middle-class debating societies that he frequented in the early eighties. In a lecture to the Zetetical Society, the earliest record of Webb's opinions, he described Mill as "the latest philosopher of the pre-scientific age" who was a continuing inspiration to Radicals through his "uniformly progressive opinions."<sup>1</sup> He continued to hold Mill in high esteem and insisted that the Principles of Political Economy marked a turning point in the history of economic thought.<sup>2</sup> The references to John Stuart Mill in Webb's writings are plentiful. Of the Fabians, it was Webb who most often claimed Mill for socialism.

Graham Wallas and Sidney Olivier came under the influence of Mill while they were students at Oxford. Their tutor Thomas Case had been an outspoken empiricist, who had rejected the Idealism that was making inroads elsewhere in the University, and kept Mill's Logic as the basis of his teaching.<sup>3</sup> Wallas had been particularly impressed by Mill's statement in the Logic that "the backward state of the Moral Sciences can only be remedied by applying to them the methods of Physical Science".<sup>4</sup> Olivier's enthusiasm for Mill, nearly rivalled that of Webb. Wallas reported him as saying when at Oxford that "After all, nobody is any good unless he has been through Mill."<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Olivier claimed that there was no intelligent or well read

<sup>1</sup>S. Webb, "The New Learning of the Nineteenth Century", pp. 2, 10.

<sup>2</sup>S. Webb, "Historic" Fabian Essays, p. 58.

<sup>3</sup>For further discussion, see M.J. Wiener, Between Two Worlds: The Political Thought of Graham Wallas, chap. 1.

<sup>4</sup>G. Wallas, "Education",

<sup>5</sup>G. Wallas, "Philosophy", Lecture for Reform Club Banquet, May 16, 1928, WP.

man in England whose opinions had not been influenced or modified by Mill.<sup>1</sup>

Beatrice Webb had "delighted in John Stuart Mill's Autobiography, and had given to his System of Logic and Principles of Political Economy an assiduous though somewhat strained attention." In My Apprenticeship she cited Mill as one of the sources of the "analytical, historical, and explanatory" "consciousness of sin" that led to the demand for state intervention,<sup>2</sup> and in a footnote she quoted at length that passage from Mill's Autobiography in which he places himself and his wife under the "general designation of Socialists."<sup>3</sup>

Confronted by the apparent discontinuity between J.S. Mill and the Fabians, in what light then are we to view this frequently expressed admiration for Mill and his ideas? W. Wolfe, in the most recent and ambitious attempt to resolve this difficulty, would answer, in the light of the moral outlook which was Mill's legacy to the early Socialists.<sup>4</sup> Wolfe, in discounting any important theoretical links between J.S. Mill's and the Fabians' economic thinking stresses that it was through Mill's "moral teaching that he prepared subsequent generations of Radical intellectuals to view Socialism in a more favourable light."<sup>5</sup> On the economic plane, however, Wolfe maintains

<sup>1</sup>S. Olivier, "John Stuart Mill on Socialism", Today (Nov., 1884)

<sup>2</sup>B. Webb, My Apprenticeship, p. 159.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 191.

<sup>4</sup>W. Wolfe, From Radicalism to Socialism, chap. 2.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 24.

that J.S. Mill's "economic theories were never very favourable to Socialist schemes."<sup>1</sup> Whilst, on a general level, the effect of Mill's moral teachings upon the subsequent intellectual climate of opinion was pronounced, the fact that the Fabians claimed Mill as a bridge to economic Socialism stands in need of an examination going beyond that of the attribution of error on the part of Barker and indeed of the Fabians themselves.<sup>2</sup>

At a purely theoretical level it is very difficult to reconcile the major discontinuities between Millite and Fabian economics with the Fabians' insistence that Mill was a bridge from Radicalism to economic Socialism. It might be argued that the Fabians were unaware of these difficulties,<sup>3</sup> but the evidence seems to indicate that the Fabians were indeed conscious of the discontinuities, and for political considerations exploited Mill's profession of qualified support for Socialism beyond the limits which intellectual integrity might have set. The Fabians recognized Mill's popularity in the Radical Clubs and among working class reformers; and their representation of themselves as the heirs to the position and tradition of Mill should be seen in this context.

In this regard the Fabians' political opportunism was leavened by a genuine regard for Mill. In many respects - his search for human

<sup>1</sup>W. Wolfe, From Radicalism to Socialism, chap. 2.

<sup>2</sup>Wolfe correctly criticizes Sir Ernest Barker's proposition that Mill served as the "bridge ... from political Radicalism to economic Socialism." "The trouble with this argument, and with others advanced by the Fabians themselves, is that they are true in their main contention, but false in their details." Ibid., pp 23-24. He is substantially correct here, but there is much to be learned by examining the uses to which the Fabians put Mill.

<sup>3</sup>J. Robson has noted that, although Mill ultimately subscribed to the least government theory, his reservations about time and place "have legitimately led readers to other conclusions." The Improvement of Mankind, p. 205. See for example, J. Schumpeter, History of Economic Analysis, pp. 531-533.



improvement, his zeal for social progress, his dedicated commitment to the performance of duty - Mill was the personification of the Fabian ideal. If their exploitation of Mill's immense prestige grew out of a shrewd appraisal of political advantage, it grew nonetheless out of a sincerely held desire to associate themselves with a man for whom they held the very highest regard.

Olivier was the first Fabian to publicly draw his colleagues' attention to Mill's socialist sympathies. In an article contributed to To-Day in 1884, Olivier paid a great personal tribute to Mill, "whose claim to a place among intellectual stars of the first magnitude will hardly be denied by any Englishman."<sup>1</sup> It would, Olivier said, be difficult to over-estimate the importance of Mill's Logic; and in the Principles of Political Economy he found the embodiment of

the bone and sinew of all its English predecessors, ... (it) remains an indispensable preparation for any who would come with a clear understanding to the problems of the time.<sup>2</sup>

Given the genius and reputation of Mill, it would be "profitable" Olivier said, "for those ... working in the same vein ... to return once again to the examination of his writings," and in particular, Olivier thought it worthwhile to examine Mill's attitude toward the Socialist movement.

<sup>1</sup>S. Olivier, "John Stuart Mill and Socialism," To-Day, Vol. II, Nov., 1884, p. 491.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 492.

Olivier noted that in "respect to the motives for the production of wealth" Mill's fundamental predisposition was individualistic; but despite this fault (which was "directly traceable to the fatal notion that sociological laws could be deduced from a consideration of the probable workings of the desire for wealth") Mill's "whole feeling" was "social" and "on almost all questions of social economy, Mill's opinions were uniformly progressive."<sup>1</sup>

Olivier particularly emphasised the fact that Mill's thought had been continually expanding and redirecting itself. He noted that in "The Claims of Labour" and The Principles Mill had stressed the role of industrial partnerships, but in the latter had indicated that such partnerships were transitional and would ultimately give way to workmen's associations. Thus in the Principles, Olivier argued, Mill was on "more advanced ground."

He opines that though the labourer cannot do without capital, he can very well do without the capitalist ... He sketches with the utmost hopefulness the process by which he anticipates the change from the capitalist organization, through profit-sharing to Collectivism, will be brought about.<sup>2</sup>

Olivier pointed to a similar redirection in opinion on the issue of land reform, noting that in the "Papers on Land Tenure" Mill justified "the principle of land nationalization."<sup>3</sup> In the matter of land tenure,

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<sup>1</sup>S. Olivier, "John Stuart Mill and Socialism," To-Day, Vol. II, Nov., 1884, pp. 496, 503, 493, 495.

<sup>2</sup>S. Olivier, "John Stuart Mill and Socialism," p. 499. "The Claims of Labour" was written in 1845. Olivier contrasted it with the 1852 edition of The Principles. Olivier was perhaps more sympathetic to Mill's proposals in "On the Probable Futurity of the Labouring Classes" than he would have been some years later when the Fabian hostility to the self-governing workshop had become entrenched. However, as Olivier made clear, he regarded Mill's schemes as an "imperfect type of Collectivism." Ibid., p. 503.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 499.

Socialistic feeling had overcome the economic tenets in which he was reared, just as his sense of the impossibility of a perpetuation of the capitalist monopoly of profits had led him to expect its rapid suppression by Collectivism, of however imperfect a type.<sup>1</sup>

While Webb was less concerned than Olivier to examine Mill's thought in depth, or attempt to extrapolate the extent of Mill's 'Socialistic feeling,' he nevertheless drew the same clear inference as Olivier that many of Mill's economic positions were mere stopping places on his road to Socialism.

Every edition of Mill's book (i.e. the Principles) became more and more Socialistic in tone, until his death revealed to the world in the "Autobiography" his emphatic and explicit repudiation of mere political democracy in favour of complete Socialism.<sup>2</sup>

By emphasising Mill's profession of Socialism in the posthumous Autobiography, Webb felt able to dismiss the co-operative venture proposed in the "On the Probable Futurity of the Labouring Classes" as "optimistic vagueness," which "was perhaps merely one of the devices sometimes adopted by Mill to avoid a premature expression of actual political schemes."<sup>3</sup>

But if, by 1889, Webb was content to deflect Mill's suggestions as to the probable future of the labouring classes, he nevertheless regarded the Principles as marking a turning point in the history of economic science.<sup>4</sup> "The Political Economists prior to Mill," Webb

<sup>1</sup> S. Olivier, "John Stuart Mill and Socialism," p. 503.

<sup>2</sup> S. Webb, Socialism in England, p. 83; also see, "Historic," Fabian Essays, p. 58.

<sup>3</sup> S. Webb, Socialism in England, p. 89.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 83; also see "Historic", Fabian Essays, p. 58.

argued, "accepted existing governments and institutions of private property as their basis." Mill's predecessors had "no idea of social development." "John Stuart Mill was almost the first to introduce the much more difficult dynamic side of the problem," which Webb attributed to Mill's study of Comte.<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, one of the most important influences of Comte and the Saint Simonian writers on Mill was to open his eyes to the "very limited and temporary value of the old political economy."<sup>2</sup> He came to believe that the main fault of his teachers lay in the

attempt to construct a permanent fabric out of transitory materials; that they take for granted the immutability of arrangements of society, many of which are in their nature fluctuating or progressive; and enunciate with as little qualification as if they were universal and absolute truths, propositions which are perhaps applicable to no state of society except the particular one in which the writer happened to live.<sup>3</sup>

It was this insistence on historical and institutional relativity, together with his expressed sympathy for Socialism which Webb saw as marking Mill off from the old political economy. In this respect Webb regarded Mill as a bridge between Philosophical Radicalism and economic Socialism.

Webb was, of course, at this time thoroughly convinced that the evolutionary trend toward collectivism was accompanied by the advance

<sup>1</sup>S. Webb, untitled paper on the general theory of the Utilitarians and political Economists, c. 1900, PP VI, 64.

<sup>2</sup>J.S. Mill, Autobiography, p. 100. See also above p. 175.

<sup>3</sup>J.S. Mill, "On Miss Martineau's Summary of Political Economy," Monthly Repository, n.s. Vol. VIII, 1834, reprinted in Essays on Economics and Society, Collected Works, Vol. IV, p. 225.



of crypto-socialistic ideas amongst the great majority of unsuspecting citizens; and the demonstration of this collectivist trend both within social institutions and social opinion was the objective of Socialism in England. In general Webb believed that,

we shall find that the progress of Socialism is to be sought mainly amongst those who are unconscious of their Socialism, many of whom, indeed, still proclaim their adherence to Individualism, Self-help, and Laissez-Faire. But in any useful classification, position will not so much depend upon the label which a man gives to his opinions or actions as upon their actual character ... many thousands have become Socialists without knowing it.<sup>1</sup>

In his contribution to Fabian Essays Webb suggested that many had "like John Stuart Mill, though less explicitly ... turned from political Democracy to a complete, though unconscious Socialism."<sup>2</sup> Thus Webb saw exemplified in Mill the "shifting of the issue in thought," the development of which was a primary characteristic of late nineteenth century opinion. For Webb, therefore, it was the shift in Mill's opinions, rather than their particular content at any point in time, which was significant.

The Fabians believed that both the underlying assumptions and the trend of Mill's economics were conducive to socialistic interpretation and they regarded his support for land reform, improved conditions for labour and government control of public utilities as practical evidence of the socialistic trend of his thinking.

The land question came to have a special significance for the Fabians. In the Principles Mill wrote:

<sup>1</sup>S. Webb, Socialism in England, p. 12.

<sup>2</sup>S. Webb, "Historic," p. 50.

The essential principle of property being to ensure to all persons what they have produced by their labour and accumulated by their abstinence, this principle cannot apply to what is not the produce of labour, the raw material of the earth.<sup>1</sup>

Since land was "the original inheritance of the whole species," property in land therefore required a special justification, different in kind from the justification of other forms of property.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the ownership of land could only be justified by considerations of social utility:

with property in moveables, and in all things the product of labour ... the owner's power both to use and of exclusion should be absolute, except where positive evil to others would result from it: but in the case of land, no exclusive right should be permitted in any individual, which cannot be shown to be productive of positive good.<sup>3</sup>

Thus Mill favoured in certain circumstances the break-up of large estates (subject to proper compensation) and their reallocation among small proprietors. He favoured special provisions in the law safeguarding the position of tenants. He also favoured special taxation of unearned income on landed property.

Mill's position on the land question became popularly known during the period of his active chairmanship of the Land Tenure Reform Association.<sup>4</sup> From the beginning he acknowledged that land national-

<sup>1</sup>J.S. Mill, Principles of Political Economy, bk. II, chap. 2, sec. 5, in Collected Works, Vol. II, p. 227.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., bk II, chap. 2, sec. 6; Vol., II, p. 230.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., pp. 231-232.

<sup>4</sup>For the programme of the Land Tenure Reform Association see, J.S. Mill, "Explanatory Statement of the Programme of the Land Tenure Reform Association," Dissertations and Discussions, IV, pp. 239-250.

ization was justified in principle, although a number of considerations made it inexpedient in practice at that time.

Speaking for myself individually, I should say that the thing (i.e. land nationalization) might rightfully be done, if it were expedient to do it, and I do not know that it may not be reserved for us in the future; but at present I decidedly do not think it expedient. I have so poor an opinion of State management, or municipal management either, that I am afraid many years would elapse before the revenue realized for the State would be sufficient to pay the indemnity which would be justly claimed by the dispossessed proprietors. It requires, I fear, a greater degree of public virtue and public intelligence than has yet been attained to administer all the land of a country like this on the public account.<sup>1</sup>

Whilst Mill did not endorse the nationalization of land at that time, he did urge the limitation of its further accumulation in private hands, and proposed that waste lands and the great estates of public bodies and endowed institutions should be publicly appropriated and administered for use as small allotments, public institutions, co-operative dwellings and sanitary measures.<sup>2</sup> The Fabians accepted these proposals, many of which were absorbed into their early 'municipalization' schemes, with the ultimate objective of increasing the scope of the municipal regulation and ownership of land through increased municipal powers of land acquisition. Mill also insisted that the community could assert its proprietary right to the land in practice by a special tax on landed property designed to alienate the landlords from the unearned increment in the revenues derived from their holdings.

<sup>1</sup>J.S. Mill, "Speech on Land Tenure Reform," Delivered 15th May, 1871, Reprinted in Dissertations and Discussions, IV, p. 256. Also see "Explanatory Statement of the Programme of the Land Tenure Reform Association."

<sup>2</sup>J.S. Mill, "Advice to Land Reformers," speeches reprinted from the Examiner Jan. 4 and 11, 1873, Dissertations and Discussions, IV, p. 74.

The Fabians' immediate debt in the extension of the theory of rent was to Walker and Marshall, but Mill's notion of 'unearned increment' figured prominently in their theory. The Fabians claimed that Mill's notion of 'unearned increment,' and his support for special taxation of land incomes, to which he had attached a high priority in his campaign for land reform, helped to create a climate of opinion more favourable to Socialist ideas.<sup>1</sup> By approaching the return to capital and ability in the same vein as Mill had approached the returns to land, the Fabians sought to represent Socialist arguments as the inevitable corollary of principles to which Radicals were willing to subscribe.<sup>2</sup> Thus in representing the social appropriation of all unearned increments as the logical outcome of Mill's ideas Sidney Olivier was at pains to point out that solutions to the difficulties of Mill's individualistic difficulties were to be found in Mill's own writings.

"I once knew a man," says Artemus Ward, "who was taken by pirates, and languisht for ten years on bred and water in a lothsum dunjin. One day a brite idee struk him. He opened the window, and got out." It seems probable that had Mill lived a few years longer, he also would have opened his window in this direction and have gotten out. When it had come to the comparing of the unearned increment of rent with that of profits, in respect of their sources, the distinction was getting a little fine. The distinction in respect of the claims of their recipients in any theory of deserving, was finer still.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> e.g. see S. Webb, Socialism in England, p. 19.

<sup>2</sup> See also discussion of Fabian theory of rent, chapter 3 above.

<sup>3</sup> S. Olivier, "John Stuart Mill and Socialism," p. 501.



Olivier drew particular attention to the trend of Mill's thinking, which allowed the Fabians to "purge out" the faults and flaws of the Principles of Political Economy.

The element of human sympathy grew ever stronger in his later work, and the last three years of his life we find devoted to eager co-operation with proletarian thinkers in the agitation for a settlement to Land Tenure upon a social basis. That in this matter Socialist feeling had overcome the economic tenets in which he was reared ... few who are familiar with his work as a whole will doubt.<sup>1</sup>

Having applied this particular purgative to the body of Mill's ideas, the Fabians were left with a series of proposals which they regarded as going more than half way to Socialism. In the final chapter of the Principles Mill had outlined an extensive list of places and circumstances in which government activity was beneficial. Among the most important of the legitimate functions of government was education, and Mill advocated state aid to elementary schools "such as to render them accessible to all the children of the poor, either freely, or for a payment too inconsiderable to be sensibly felt."<sup>2</sup>

Another important exception to the general rule of laissez-faire was in the area of public utilities and services. Mill supported government regulation of the gas and water supply, and advocated

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<sup>1</sup>S. Olivier, "John Stuart Mill and Socialism," pp. 503-504.

<sup>2</sup>J.S. Mill, Principles of Political Economy, bk. 5, chap. 11, sec. 8, in Collected Works, Vol. III, p. 950.

that services like the paving and cleansing of streets be performed by municipal authorities. In other similar cases, like roads, canals, and railways,

the community needs some other security for the fit performance of the service than the interest of the managers; and it is the part of government, either to subject the business to reasonable conditions for the general advantage, or to retain such power over it, that the public profits of the monopoly may at least be obtained for the public.<sup>1</sup>

Mill also excepted cases in which "classes of persons may need the assistance of law, to give effect to their deliberate collective opinion of their interest."<sup>2</sup> Thus, he argued, there might be legal limitations to the hours of work.

Another proper function of the state was to dispense public charity. Subject to the less-eligibility principle, Mill thought it "highly desirable that the certainty of subsistence should be held out by law to the destitute able bodied, rather than that their relief should depend on voluntary charity."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>J.S. Mill, Principles of Political Economy, bk. 5, chap. 11, sec. 11, in Collected Works, III, p. 256. Also see, Public Agency v. Trading Companies, The Economical and Administrative Principles of Water-Supply for the Metropolis. Correspondence between J.S. Mill, Esq. Author of 'Principles of Political Economy,' and the Metropolitan Sanitary Association on the Proper Agency for Regulating the Water-Supply for the Metropolis, as a Question of Economical and Administrative Principle. (London, 1851).

<sup>2</sup>J.S. Mill, Principles of Political Economy, bk 5, chap. 11, sec. 12, in Collected Works, III, p. 958.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., bk. 5, chap. 11, sec. 13, III, p. 926.

In addition, Mill supported health legislation,<sup>1</sup> and the legal enforcement of Sunday rest.<sup>2</sup> He defended the right of workers to combine<sup>3</sup> and declared himself in favour of the regulation of children's employment.<sup>4</sup> He also advocated the levying of death duties on property and a graduated and differentiated income tax.<sup>5</sup>

In general Mill did not deny that "some great good" often demanded the suspension of the "general practice" of laissez-faire.<sup>6</sup> Nor did he deny that the growing network of social interactions entailed more and more government activity.<sup>7</sup> However, he never regarded this type of government interference as socialistic, but rather as legitimate exceptions to the general rule of laissez-faire in areas where government activity would promote social utility.

Nevertheless, to the Fabians, Mill's support for such measures as government regulations of 'practical monopolies' and the hours and conditions of labour, sounded "curiously like practical socialism."<sup>8</sup>

<sup>1</sup>See J.S. Mill, Review of the "Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain" in the Examiner, 20 Aug. 1842.

<sup>2</sup>See J.L. Prevost, 'Diaries', Proceedings of the Political Economy Club, VI (London, 1921).

<sup>3</sup>J.S. Mill, The Principles of Political Economy, bk. 5, chap. 10, sec. 5, in Collected Works, III, pp. 929-934.

<sup>4</sup>J.S. Mill, Principles of Political Economy, bk. 5, chap. 11, sec. 9, in Collected Works, Vol. III, pp. 950-953.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., bk 5, chap. 2, secs. 3-4, Vol. III, pp. 809-819.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., bk. 5, chap. 11, sec. 7, Vol. III, p. 945.

<sup>7</sup>See J.S. Mill, "Centralisation," Edinburgh Review, Vol. CXV, April, 1862, pp. 335-336.

<sup>8</sup>"Was Mill a Socialist?", The Daily Chronicle, March 11, 1891. The article is anonymous but the style suggests Webb's authorship.

In so far as many of their demands were similar to those Mill had supported, they claimed him as a Fabian John the Baptist.

This claim was not simply a naive equation of state intervention with Socialism but a useful weapon of propaganda. There was an immediate practical advantage to be gained from associating Mill with Socialism. John Stuart Mill, as the Fabians were aware, enjoyed a remarkable popularity with working men in the London Radical Clubs, and in emphasising Mill's socialist tendencies they hoped to bridge the gap between Radicalism and Socialism.

It was not coincidental that after 1886, references to Mill's professions of Socialism should figure so prominently in the writings of that consummate opportunist, Sidney Webb. The issue of Home Rule, the 'defection' of Chamberlain and the Liberal defeat in the general election of 1886 had left the Radicals demoralized and leaderless. The time was ripe for Socialist infiltration of the Radical Clubs and Liberal Associations.

In June, 1886 Mrs. Annie Besant, with the aid of Bland and Bolas, succeeded in her campaign to draw the Fabian Society into greater involvement with the Radicals, by arranging a three day conference of Radical and Socialist clubs and societies under the auspices of the Fabian Society.<sup>1</sup> The practical significance of the conference was to make the Fabian Society known in Radical circles, thereby making it easier for the Fabians to carry out a policy of permeation. The Fabians thus revived the original ambition of the Democratic Federation to win the Radical Clubs for Socialism; and they supposed that this

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<sup>1</sup>For Mrs. Besant's report of the conference see To-Day, Vol. 6, July, 1886.



would be considerably assisted by enlisting the weight of Mill's popularity and prestige on the side of Socialism.

In the ensuing years Webb drew attention to Mill's professions of Socialism and insisted that Socialists were simply following in Mill's footsteps.<sup>1</sup> In describing "The Progress of Socialism," Webb said, that "We .... call ourselves Socialists to-day largely through Mill's teaching."<sup>2</sup> Similarly, in an address describing the Fabian Society he declared:

The Fabian Society, which has now nearly completed its eighth year of existence, is an organization of men and women who are convinced, with John Stuart Mill, that the way out of our present social and industrial anarchy lies in the substitution of Socialism for Individualism as the dominant principle of social politics.<sup>3</sup>

Webb attempted to associate Mill with Socialism with considerable license, often quoting him out of context and representing his position as other than it was. For example, Webb's favourite quotation was from "On the Probable Futurity of the Labouring Classes":

La racine la plus profonde des maux et des iniquities qui couvrent le monde industriel, n'est pas la concurrence, mais bien l'exploitation due travail par le capital, et la part enorme que les possesseurs des instruments de travail prevelent sur les produits.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>E.g. See S. Webb, "What Socialism Means," "The Economic Basis of Socialism," "The Progress of Socialism," "Historic," Socialism in England, "The Fabian Society: Its Objects and Methods," An Address given in Nottingham 26th Nov. 1891 (Netherfield, Notts.).

<sup>2</sup>S. Webb, "The Progress of Socialism,"

<sup>3</sup>S. Webb, "The Fabian Society: Its Objects and Methods,"

<sup>4</sup>J.S. Mill, Principles of Political Economy, bk. 4, chap. 7, sec. 7 in Collected Works, Vol. III, p. 795.

In fact the statement was by M. Feugueray, not Mill; and Webb could not have possibly been unaware of this. Nevertheless, he more often than not attributed it directly to Mill.

The proper context of the statement is within Mill's discussion of workingmen's associations, in which it is used in support of Mill's argument for competition between associations. Webb however, used it in arguments against co-operation. In an article on "The Economic Limits of Co-operation" Webb wrote:

Even John Stuart Mill, its great advocate and supporter, turned on further consideration, regretfully away from the mere abolition of competition as a remedy for social evils, and leaves us his emphatic opinion, that "the deepest root of the evils and iniquities which fill the industrial world is not competition, but the subjection of labour to capital, and the enormous share which the possessors of the instruments of industry are able to take from the produce."<sup>1</sup>

This was a total confusion of Mill's argument and indicated a profound misunderstanding of Mill, if not a deliberate misrepresentation. Mill did not see co-operation and competition as polar opposities. While he hoped that co-operative schemes would end the demoralizing master servant relationship, he never sought to eliminate competition from the form of co-operation he advocated.

When not turning Mill's statement to oppose co-operation, Webb used it in support of Fabian collectivist measures. He used Mill to

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<sup>1</sup>S. Webb, "The Economic Limits of Co-operation," ; Also see "The Progress of Socialism,"

state the social evil and followed it with Fabian reform proposals, the juxtaposition of the evil and the remedy being such as to give the audience or reader the impression that Mill himself supported such proposals.<sup>1</sup> Such distortions went beyond an attempt to imply collectivism into Mill's arguments, and it seems improbable that Webb could have been unaware of it. In his eagerness to enlist Mill's prestige for the cause of Socialism Webb was not averse to sacrificing a little intellectual honesty to gain an immediate political advantage.

Barker was correct when he said that Mill served "as the bridge from ... political Radicalism to economic Socialism" only in the sense that the Fabians hoped that Mill would be.<sup>2</sup> The structure was of the Fabians' own shaping, and its foundations were the trends in Mill's 'progressive opinions' and Socialist sympathies, rather than in their detailed content. The Fabians were convinced that whereas society was evolving toward collectivism, most people were unconscious of this progressive development. It was the task of those who had grasped the essential development of society to turn this unconscious tendency into a conscious one. Thus much Fabian propaganda was devoted to demonstrating and promoting the gradual but steady progress of Socialist ideas - a process which Mill was taken to personify.

In their efforts to convert Radicals to Socialism the Fabians presented Socialism as the necessary and inevitable outcome of Radicalism. Annie Besant argued that if Radicals logically and consis-

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<sup>1</sup>E.g. See "The Progress of Socialism," ; "Facts for Socialists,"

<sup>2</sup>Sir Ernest Barker, Political Thought in England, , p. 215.

tently pursued their principles they would arrive at Socialism.<sup>1</sup> In this sense, as Shaw proclaimed in 1887, "the new Radicalism is Socialism."<sup>2</sup> Webb whole-heartedly concurred in this view. In his Fabian essay Webb declared that "the whole of the immediately practicable demands of the most exacting Socialists are indeed, now often embodied in the current Radical programme."<sup>3</sup> The Radical programme (which Webb reproduced from the Star) Webb insisted, demonstrated that the Radical working man "Like John Stuart Mill, though less explicitly ... has turned from mere political Democracy to a complete, though unconscious Socialism."<sup>4</sup>

In the Fabian attempt to appeal to and permeate the Radical Clubs, Mill assumed significance as a popular Radical figure who had expressed a sympathy with Socialism; and by asserting Mill as the bridge with Socialism, the Fabians sought to assist the creation of a climate of opinion that was more susceptible to collectivism and the idea of government initiative. Through Mill's thought they hoped to stimulate 'unconscious Socialism,' and thus fuse the Radical and Socialist traditions.

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<sup>1</sup>A. Besant, report of Fabian conference, To-Day, Vol. 6, July, 1885.

<sup>2</sup>G.B. Shaw, "The New Radicalism," in L. Crompton, Op. Cit., p. 19.

<sup>3</sup>S. Webb, "Historic," Op. Cit., pp. 53-54. Also see Socialism in England, pp. 25-27.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 56.



## THE NEW UTILITARIANS?

The early Fabians have commonly been regarded as latter-day Utilitarians. Indeed, G.D.H. Cole, historian and latter-day Fabian, conferred upon them the title "The New Utilitarians."<sup>1</sup>

This characterization is a familiar one, and whilst there have been some rather eccentric explanations of it,<sup>2</sup> most accounts of the

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<sup>1</sup>G.D.H. Cole, British Working Class Politics (London, 1941), chap. 9. R. Harrison attributes the title to Engels. "Benthamite, Positivists and Fabians," an unpublished paper which the author kindly allowed me to read.

<sup>2</sup>It has been suggested that the Fabian Utilitarian connection was cemented by the utilitarianism of Stanley Jevons. Thus P. Fox and G.H. Scott point to the "remarkable" similarity between Jevons policy recommendations and the philosophy of the Fabian political programme with its emphasis on investigation, quantitative arguments and utilitarian empirical and pragmatic solutions. "The Early Fabians--Economists and Reformers." , p. 313. Whilst the similarities might be remarkable there is no evidence to suggest that the Fabians owed any theoretical debt to Jevons other than the adoption of the marginal utility theory of value. (Fox and Gordon based their suggestion on Sir Ernest Barker's argument that S. Jevons' The State in Relation to Labour (which insisted that legislation must proceed on the basis of empirical judgements presented in quantitative form) "Pointed the way to that method of 'legislation by statistics' which has become the general rule during the last thirty years." Political Thought in England, , p. 207). G.D.H. Cole linked the Fabians' acceptance of the Jevonian doctrine of marginal utility to his description of them as the 'New Utilitarians'. "Their economics, like their politics, were of the utilitarian brand. They needed for this purpose not, like Marx, a revolutionary critique of capitalist society such as the theory of surplus value, but rather a new interpretation of the orthodox economics of Stanley Jevons, so as to weight 'utility' in accordance with the view that a shilling meant much less real utility to a rich man than to a poor one. It followed that, the more evenly incomes were distributed, the greater the sum total of utility and happiness was likely to be." British Working Class Politics, p. 123. Cole appears to have been unfamiliar with Fabian economic theory. The Fabian theory of distribution was based on a generalized concept of rent and the notion of 'unearned income.' See chapter 3 above.

Fabians as 'New Utilitarians' fall into two categories: those which stress styles of activity,<sup>1</sup> and those which emphasise philosophic community.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In this respect the best account, and one to which I am much indebted, is R. Harrison's. See Before the Socialists, particularly the model of intellectual ginger groups; "Intellectuals in Politics," : "Benthamite, Positivists and Fabians." Sir Ernest Barker briefly remarked on the similarities between the Utilitarians and the Fabians: "In either case we have a small circle of thinkers and investigators, in quiet touch with politicians; in either case we have a 'permeation' of general opinion by the ideas of these thinkers and investigators." He predicted that : "it is probable that the historian of the future will emphasise Fabianism in much the same way as the historian of to-day emphasises Benthamism." Political Thought in England, p.p. 215, 216 M. Mack, "Fabians and Utilitarians," Journal of the History of Ideas, Vol. XVI, 1955, p.p. 76-88, suggested parallels between the Fabians and Utilitarians as regards styles of activity. However, the account is rather superficial and is beset with methodological difficulties. Most recently, S. Pierson has suggested that "Fabian Socialism tended to contract to the kind of legislative and administrative problems which had largely occupied Bentham." Marxism and the Origins of British Socialism (London, 1973), p. 106 and chap. 5 in passim. Unfortunately, Pierson does not attempt to point out the comparison in detail.

<sup>2</sup> G.D.H. Cole suggested that the philosophical underpinnings of the Fabian programme was a revised Utilitarianism. "...a quite definite philosophy underlay the Fabian programme. Webb and his fellow-workers were Benthamites, Utilitarians of the school of Bentham and Mill, presenting a new version of the doctrine of the 'greatest happiness of the greatest number' in terms appropriate to the new age. They held that, whereas in Bentham's day the main task might have been the removal of forms of State interference which prevented happiness, in their own day the supreme need was the enactment of new measures of State intervention in order to promote happiness." British Working Class Politics, p.p. 122-123. For a similar argument see T. Nairn, "The nature of the Labour Party," in Towards Socialism eds. P. Anderson and R. Blackburn (London, 1965) p. 165 A.M. McBriar cast the problem in a different light and examined the question in terms of the degree of subscription to a definition of Rightness as conducive to the greatest common Good and to a definition of Good as 'the greatest happiness of the greatest number.' Fabian Socialism and English Politics, p.p. 149-154. It is apparent that the question presented McBriar with major difficulties. The account of individual Fabians is confused and indecisive. Most remarkable however is his omission of Wallas, who became an authority on Bentham.

In consideration of the first approach, there is no difficulty in justifying the description of the Fabians as 'New Utilitarians' if all that is meant is that they were both politico-philosophical societies. Both the Utilitarians and the Fabians were small groups of intellectuals, intent upon social reform and the rational restructuring of society, convinced of their own importance and effectiveness. The Utilitarians and the Fabians had a passionate impulse to improve and change society. They were both materialistic and refused to appeal to abstract rightness. Both groups were concerned with developing a new science of society. The Utilitarians and the Fabians were both dedicated to influencing and challenging prevailing political ideas and policy, rather than to large scale independent political action; and it is important to stress the essential smallness of both groups. For neither the Utilitarians nor the Fabians were numbers crucial. Although at times both groups were torn between permeating existing political parties and establishing their own party, a shared capacity for sustained hard work enabled both groups to operate effectively with limited numbers. They applied themselves to set tasks with an unremitting dedication; they were content to work without personal recognition and were content to effect social change without the personal trappings normally accorded to power and influence. The Spectator's observation of Bentham could have been applied equally well to the members of the Fabian Society:

Few men have done more of the world's work with so little external sign...He was essentially a public man, but his work was usually behind the curtain.. He loved quiet power for the purpose of promoting good ends. <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Spectator, January 7, 1854.



Both groups were metropolitan, living in close proximity to one another and to the centres of government. Thus they were able to meet frequently and were conveniently placed for lobbying activities. Importantly, both groups were based on long established personal friendships between predominantly middle class intellectuals to a large extent free from financial worry and living either on independent incomes or as professional men.

The consequences of these similarities seem to have been important for both groups. Out of these bonds of continuing personal friendship and exclusiveness, both the Utilitarians and the Fabians established a common long term commitment to a developing body of ideas.

One of Graham Wallas' most keen observations in his Life of Francis Place, stressed the importance of ties of friendship for an intellectual ginger group.

The history of any definite school of philosophic or political opinion will generally show that its foundation was made possible by personal friendship.

So few men can devote themselves to continuous thought that, if several think on the same lines for many years, it is almost always because they have encouraged each other to proceed. And varieties of opinion and temperament are so indefinite, that those who accept a new party name, and thereby make themselves responsible for each others utterances are generally bound by personal loyalty as well as by intellectual agreement. <sup>1</sup>

It is in this milieu that Bentham's and Webb's positions in their respective ginger groups becomes clear. Both Bentham and Webb are generally taken as the principal thinkers and

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<sup>1</sup> G. Wallas, The Life of Francis Place (London, 1898), p. 65.



leading spokesmen of their groups; their ideas being taken respectively as representative of Utilitarianism and Fabianism. However, Bentham and Webb were representative of their particular circles in a way that may be distinguished from the leadership of larger less closely knit political groupings. They were representative not in the sense that they were the acknowledged leaders of their particular group in terms of power, nor even in the sense of master and apprentice, but in the sense that to a large degree they both embodied and reflected the thought of their groups as a whole. Bentham was representative of Utilitarianism, Webb of Fabianism, in that they gave expression to ideas arrived at over long periods of time through discussion with others of their circle.

The Fabians, particularly Webb, Shaw, Olivier and Wallas, whose close personal friendship pre-dated their joining the Society, often stressed the importance of their intellectual intimacy. Webb, once described to Beatrice his association with Shaw, Wallas and Olivier, as a "pretty piece of intellectual communism" marked by "trust in each other, willingness to obey each other, and subordinate ourselves to the group."<sup>1</sup> For her part Beatrice found "the charm" of these men in their relations to each other in "the genuine care, for each other, the truthfulness and practical communism of property and ideas."<sup>2</sup> Bland gave as characteristic of the Fabian Society, "the critical attitude of its corporate mind,"<sup>3</sup> while Shaw, writing of the early history of the Fabian Society, remarked on the equality and personal intimacy of the Fabians.<sup>4</sup> In the preface to the First edition of Fabian Essays, Shaw was anxious to

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<sup>1</sup>S. Webb to B. Potter, August 26, 1890, PP.

<sup>2</sup>B. Potter, Diary, August 26, 1890, PP.

<sup>3</sup>H. Bland, Essays, p. 225

<sup>4</sup>G.B. Shaw, "The Fabian Society: Its Early History," Fabian Tract No. 41

stress that "not one of the essays could be what it is had the writer been a stranger to his six colleagues and to the Society." <sup>1</sup>

Shaw has left valuable descriptions of his working relationship with Webb, Olivier, Wallas and Bland. He wrote:

As my colleagues were men of exceptional character and attainments, I was soon able to write with a Fabian purview and knowledge which made my feuilletons and other literary performances quite unlike anything which the ordinary literary hermit-crab could produce. Thus the reputedly brilliant extraordinary Shaw was in fact brilliant and extraordinary because he had in the Fabian Politbureau an incomparable critical thinking machine for his ideas. When I seemed most original and fantastic, I was often simply an amanuensis and a mouthpiece with a rather exceptional literary and dramatic knack cultivated by dogged practice. <sup>2</sup>

Of his relationship with Webb Shaw wrote:

The difference between Shaw with Webb's brains, knowledge, and official experience and Shaw by himself was enormous. But as I was and am an incorrigible histrionic mountebank and Webb was the simplest of geniuses, I was often in the centre of the stage whilst he was invisible in the prompter's box. <sup>3</sup>

If, in comparing the Fabians and the Utilitarians as regards construction of the groups and styles of activity, the resemblances are striking, they are the more so if they are compared as regards spheres of activity. The two groups overlap in their areas of concern. The parallels are many: on trade unions, Place and the Webbs; on the Poor Law, Chadwick and Grote and the Webbs; on Education, Brougham and Roebuck, and Wallas, the Webbs,

<sup>1</sup> Preface to 1889 edition of Fabian Essays

<sup>2</sup> G.B. Shaw. Shaw, An Autobiography 1856-1898, Selected From his writings by S. Weintraub (London, 1970), p. 128.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p. 122

Headlam. On issues like local government and factory reform there were also overlapping interests.

There is also a similarity between the two groups in their efforts for administrative perfection. Both groups stressed the importance of administrative uniformity and of the simplification of government machinery by the absorption of ad hoc authorities into the ordinary machinery of government. The Benthamites insisted on the importance of central inspection and central audit; the Fabians on measurement and publicity. Both groups also stressed that in order for the functions of government to be exercised with the desired continuity and competence, they should be delegated to specialists and administrative experts.

At one level, the significance of the term 'New Utilitarian' is that it highlights the place of the Fabians in a continuum of political-philosophic societies which includes the Utilitarians and to a lesser extent the English Positivists. This point has been previously stressed by Professor R. Harrison and is usefully illustrated by his model of intellectual schools in politics. Harrison presents five characteristics upon which the success of such groups depend:

First, the leading spirits must be bound together by ties of personal friendship extending over many years. From this relationship arises a common commitment to ideas that are the products of several minds.

Second, the school must arrive at principles which have such fecundity that they can supply and replenish legislative programmes.

Third, they must be able to create at least that minimum of organisation without which they cannot popularise their principles. They must have some command over journals and platforms.

Fourth, they must be able to win the confidence of powerful and dissatisfied groups interested in change. At the same time they need to combine their special relations with the leaders of such groups with some access, however limited, to the highest circles of established power.

Fifth, they must be able to promote direct political action either through the 'permeation' of existing parties or by means of their 'own' candidates or both. Yet the leading spirits are usually most effective when they are free from personal political ambition. For the moment they enter parliament they tend to compromise their intellectual independence and reduce the volume and effectiveness of their research and propaganda. <sup>1</sup>

Whilst the Positivists, owing partly to their religiosity, failed to meet all of these conditions,<sup>2</sup> the Utilitarians and the Fabians met most of them. It is in this context that the Fabians most clearly emerge as the 'New Utilitarians.'

But perhaps what gives the term 'New Utilitarians' special significance is that once the Fabians ceased to be a drawing-room discussion group and became actively engaged in metropolitan politics, they began to self-consciously identify themselves within the tradition of politico-philosophic societies which had done so much to shape law and opinion in nineteenth century England. Shaw attributed the development of this heightened historical self-consciousness to a series of lectures on the Chartist Movement which Wallas gave to the Society in 1888.<sup>3</sup> These

<sup>1</sup> R. Harrison, Before the Socialists, p. 254

<sup>2</sup> The Positivists initially had no formal organisation. When they did turn to organisation it was in the interests of Congreve's projects for religious regeneration. In addition, because Positivism looked to moral rather than to political solutions, its principles did not have "the fecundity that can supply and replenish legislative programmes." For a full discussion of these points see R. Harrison, Before the Socialists, chapter, VI, Sec. iv, in passim, and esp. pp. 314, 328-329.

<sup>3</sup> For a summary of these lectures see Our Corner, Aug. and Sept., 1888



lectures Shaw recalled:

wrought a tremendous disillusion as to the novelty of our ideas and methods of propaganda; much new gospel suddenly appeared to us as stale failure; and we recognized that there had been weak men before Agamemnon, even as far back as in Cromwell's army. The necessity for mastering the history of our own movement and 1 falling into our ordered place in it became apparent...

If Wallas' lectures on Chartism had stimulated a certain measure of historical self-consciousness among the Fabians, his study of the life of Francis Place perhaps encouraged it. In 1892, while researching Chartism at the British Museum, Wallas came across a large uncatalogued collection of the papers of Francis Place. Wallas decided to postpone the planned book on Chartism and undertook a biography of Place. He was particularly interested in Place's life as an example of the practical effects of the ideas of the Philosophic Radicals.<sup>2</sup>

In his book, Wallas stressed Place's "intimate and practical acquaintance with the working of democracy."<sup>3</sup>, but also noted that Place was more than a mere "practical" politician: "He strove by severe study to acquire a constant intellectual basis for his work.." <sup>4</sup>

Wallas's historical work generated an interest in Bentham and he began to read Bentham's writings. Philosophically, he never became a Benthamite. Despite agreeing with Bentham that men

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<sup>1</sup> G.B. Shaw, Appendix to Pease, Op. Cit., pp. 277-278. Shaw also claimed that these lectures helped to turn the Society away from abstract deductive economics to modern historical concrete economics. See above p. 165.

<sup>2</sup> See Wallas to F.C. Miers, Nov. 14, 1892 WP.

<sup>3</sup> G. Wallas, The Life of Francis Place (London, 1898), p. 154.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 162

must act in order to forward the cause of human happiness, he did not subscribe to the greatest happiness formula. In Human Nature and Politics Wallas declared that, "Bentham's Utilitarianism was killed by the unanswerable refusal of the plain man to believe that ideas of pleasure and pain were the only sources of human motive."<sup>1</sup> However, Wallas regarded Bentham as a great political innovator; and, as an intellectual ginger group in politics, admired the Utilitarians for the breadth of their intelligence, their leadership and activity.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps it was in the spirit of historical self-consciousness, stimulated by Wallas' growing enthusiasm for the Benthamites, that Webb, in a lecture to the Society on its tenth anniversary, compared the Fabians to the Philosophic Radicals. In his lecture Webb praised the Philosophic Radicals as opposed to contemporary liberals, because they were systematic and constructive, looking at society as a whole and connecting their recommendations to a theory of human nature. Webb could find no better description of the effect of Socialist propaganda on the public mind than that given to the work of the Benthamites.

<sup>1</sup> G. Wallas, Human Nature and Politics (London, 1908), p. 13.

<sup>2</sup> Wallas' interest in Bentham continued to grow. In the 1920's he wrote two articles on the relevance of Bentham to current problems. ("Jeremy Bentham," Political Science Quarterly, March, 1923; "Bentham as Political Inventor," Contemporary Review, CXXIX, March, 1926). H.G. Wells recalled a time when Wallas was speaking about Bentham: "I remember his glasses gleaming appreciatively as he squatted in my lowest easy chair and dialated on the 'Old boys' abundance and breadth of range." Experiment in Autobiography: Discoveries and Conclusions of a Very Ordinary Brain (N.Y., 1934), p. 511. For a lengthy discussion of Wallas and Benthamism see, Wiener, Between Two Worlds,

They produced a much more serious effect on public opinion than superficial inquiries perceived, or interested ones would acknowledge. The important practical effect was not made evident by converting and bringing over large numbers of political partisans from one banner or class to another; but it was shown by affecting the conclusions of all classes, and inducing them, while they retained their old distinctive names to reason after a new fashion, and according to principles wholly different 1 from those to which they had been previously accustomed.

The Socialists, Webb continued, "are the Benthamites of this generation." While they lacked men of the calibre of Bentham and James Mill, it was their task "to bring to bear a body of systematic and constructive political thought with which the Philosophic Radicals won their great triumphs." 2

If in emphasising the Fabians as 'New Utilitarians' it is relevant to point to a shared concern to define and apply abstract principles as a guide to practical public policy,<sup>3</sup> it is of relevance

<sup>1</sup> S. Webb, "Socialism: True and False," a lecture to the Fabian Society, Jan. 21, 1894. Published as Fabian Tract No. 51. p. 6. Webb was quoting J.A. Roebuck.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p. 19

<sup>3</sup> In this respect it should be noted that the Fabians' primary concern was not with major premises or first principles--in that regard Bentham was considerably Webb's superior. The Fabians were pleased to invite comparison with the Utilitarians as to the effect of their ideas and activities upon law and public opinion, (cf. B. Webb's deferring to G.M. Trevelyan's description of the place of the Fabian Society in British politics: "By the end of the century it is in Fabianism that we find the nearest approach to a body of doctrine directly affecting the laws and administration of the time, like the doctrines of Bentham and Mill in the Past." Our Partnership. p. 107, n. 1. Also see E. Pease, The History of the Fabian Society pp. 244-245.) but they made no claims to such thorough-going philosophical rigour. The Fabians were synthesizers, and were more concerned with the effect of the application of scientific discoveries and methods than they were with first principles. Thus Wallas ruefully acknowledged twenty years later that "there exists no party today whose political opinions are based to the same degree as those of the Utilitarians and the Painites upon a complete system of political philosophy." Review of Leslie Stephens, The English Utilitarians, The Speaker, March 2, 1910, WP.

to point to the revolutionary changes which had occurred in the real world out of which both groups drew their abstractions. On the basis of a simple but effective principle against which all human actions, but particularly that form of human action involving public policy, especially in the sphere of law, Bentham proposed a variety of reforms in a society which had been changed, but not fundamentally revolutionized by industrialization. The world which informed Bentham's radicalism was one in which industrialization had yet to fundamentally disrupt the continuity which bound up the ancient regime--as then privileged, unreformed and corrupt--with the traditional society of the past. As the "Philosopher of the English shopkeeper" <sup>1</sup> Bentham, a radical reformer and opponent of the old corruption of entrenched aristocratic interests, was undoubtedly the spokesman of the emerging and increasingly self-conscious middle class, whose economic support was a world of competitive, small scale capitalist enterprise. When Bentham spoke in the name of the general interest against the corrupt and privileged interests of aristocratic oligarchy the general interest which he identified was clearly that of the bourgeoisie, the class to which he belonged and the class to which he appealed.

As spokesmen for the entrepreneurial middle class the Utilitarians sought a well-ordered society, and in championing the interests of the entrepreneurial middle class within this society against the idleness, corruption and excesses of the ancien regime, they recognised that sane government intervention was necessary (provided that it was limited, cheap, safeguarded against corruption, professional and efficient). What separated them from the Fabians was not the

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Marx described Bentham as "that insipid, pedantic, leather-tongued oracle of the ordinary bourgeois intelligence of the nineteenth century," the genius of "bourgeois stupidity," the "philosopher of the English shopkeeper." Capital (Modern Library ed., N.Y., 1936), p. 668.



fact of government intervention but its character. Whilst the Utilitarians were prepared to countenance state intervention to supplement individualism, the Fabians sought state intervention to supplant it.

The Fabians saw this as a distinction which was explained by the fact that the Utilitarians' radicalism had not been informed by the fundamental social changes which industrialization effected in the half century which separated them from the Fabians. For their awareness of the importance of the dynamic of society as an ideal, the Fabians acknowledged the profound influence of Herbert Spencer.

It was this absolute transformation of society which separated the Fabian from the Utilitarian experience as an intellectual ginger group in politics. Arising out of the rapid extension of urbanization, a rise in real living standards, the growth of a large scale capitalistic sector whose organizational development involved the specialization of entrepreneurial and managerial functions and a consequent increased development of a public bureaucracy both at local and central level, there grew rapidly in the third quarter, and still more dramatically in the final quarter of the century, a new social stratum of salaried professionals. H. Perkin has estimated that by 1867 these accounted for one out of six non-manual occupations; and that between 1841 and 1881 professional occupations trebled in number (with the new salaried professions expanding much faster than older, fee charging ones) compared with an increase of only sixty-six percent or so in the general population.<sup>1</sup> Thus the rapidly changing structure of the capitalist economy threw up in late nineteenth century Britain an important group of salaried professionals within the middle class.

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<sup>1</sup> H. Perkin, The Origins of Modern English Society 1780-1880 (London, 1969), p.330

The Fabian experience as intellectuals in politics emerged out of the crystallization of this group as a distinct social formation, as an expression of what Shaw and Webb referred to as the nouvelle couche sociale.<sup>1</sup> Whereas the Utilitarians never regarded themselves as in any way distinct from the middle class, the Fabians consciously saw themselves as members of a new social stratum which was distinct from the entrepreneurial, commercial and industrial middle class.

As salaried professionals this nouvelle couche sociale was released from the narrow constraints of economic interest which wedded the entrepreneurial and landowning classes to the existing economic order and enabled them to aspire to independent thought. Standing, as it were, outside the struggle between the proletariat and propertied class for the division of wealth, and possessing professional expertise employable by any economic system capable of producing sufficient wealth to support a demand for their skills, as a social stratum they were not tied by economic interest to any particular system. However, their interests would obviously be served by any system which esteemed and rewarded intelligence, ability, professional training, disinterestedness and expert services. The Fabians were conscious of themselves as a contingent within this nouvelle couche sociale; and in these regards the Fabians saw from their evolutionary studies the historical role of the independence of intellectual thought of which the new social stratum was capable, not, as the Positivists did, as moralizers of the other classes, but as trained experts who were equipped both with

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<sup>1</sup> As E.J. Hobsbawm has pointed out the importance of members from the nouvelle couche sociale among the Fabian leadership cannot be numerically estimated, "because individuals like Webb and Shaw counted for more than one." However, as a sample: "Of the twenty-one who sat on the Fabian executive in the course of 1892, five were women, two workers, six probably members of the old middle and upper classes (defined, in the absence of other indications, by education at Oxford or Cambridge), and eight probably members of the lower middle and new professional strata (including one who cannot be identified).

the knowledge that society had become dynamic, and with the professional expertise to consciously direct its progress in a collectivist direction. Whilst rejecting middle class individualism, and seeking to forge an electoral alliance with a newly enfranchised working class ally against the entrenched economic interests of the landlord, capitalist and rentier, they saw themselves as transcending the sectional interests of society in order to consciously direct the new democracy through institutional adaptation according to the collectivist imperatives of social evolution.

If, as H. Perkin has suggested, Bentham spoke to the Fabians' professional condition, it is thus important to emphasise that not only had the revolutionary changes in industrial society transformed the perception of that condition, but through their evolutionary studies Fabians saw in the revolutionary changes themselves a new dynamic ideal for society. Thus whilst as intellectuals in politics the Fabians shared with the Utilitarians an attempt to construct a new science of society and politics, their fundamental propositions about the nature of man and of human society with which all social and political theories begin, and which underpin attempts to construct a science of society, diverged dramatically.

The attempts of both the Utilitarians and the Fabians to construct a science of society reflected the scientific preoccupations of their ages. Employing different models drawn from the natural sciences both the Utilitarians and the Fabians sought to apply contemporary scientific discoveries within the contemporary social context.

He also referred to himself as the new Linnaeus and sometimes the new Luther.

John Dalton is generally credited with the creation of the atomic theory. However, Dalton had received his theory from Newton who was "responsible for transferring atomic ideas from philosophy into the great current of physics and chemistry." W.B. Ewart: *The Conflict Between Atomic and Conservation Theory*, (London, 1910), p. 3.

In the Newtonian and post-Newtonian eras of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the science of physics was used as a model for the social sciences. The Utilitarians were of the generation when the physics of Newton held sway over the minds of students of society. Halevy in his study of the Philosophical Radicals refers to the development of Newtonian physics as an important influence in the formation of Philosophical Radicalism.

...the development of the physical sciences, the discovery of Newton's principle...made it possible to found on a single law a complete science of nature, and the conception of the hope of discovering an analogous principle capable of serving for the establishment of a synthetic science of the phenomena of moral and social life. 1

The Utilitarians saw the existing social and political order as chaotic, anarchic and irrational. The apparently inexplicable disorder and disharmony of the social world stood in contrast to the apparently explicable ordered and lawful world of nature. The task seemed clear, to construct a new science of society based on a model of the exact sciences, so as to do for the social sphere what had been done in the natural sphere. "What Newton, what Locke, what Priestly, or what Hume ever illuminated the paths of Law?" asked Bentham. 2 Not surprisingly when Bentham set out to apply science to law and politics, he referred to himself as the Newton. 3

For their model of society the Utilitarians turned to Newtonian atomism. 4 The natural world as Newton conceived it was composed of separate and isolated, hard unchangeable basic particles. Society as

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<sup>1</sup> E. Halevy, The Growth of Philosophic Radicalism (London, 1970), p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> From an unpublished work, Juries, 1790, quoted in M. Mack, Jeremy Bentham, (London, 1962), p. 97

<sup>3</sup> He also referred to himself as the new Linnaeus and sometimes the new Luther.

<sup>4</sup> John Dalton is generally credited with the creation of the atomic theory. However, Dalton had received his theory from Newton who was "responsible for transferring atomism from philosophy into the great current of physics and chemistry." W.L. Scott, The Conflict Between Atomism and Conservation Theory, (London, 1970), p. 3.



the Utilitarians conceived it was a loose aggregate of individuals, each complete and self-contained. James Mill explained that the individual was the basic social unit.

For ascertaining and knowing amounts some contrivance is requisite. It is necessary to conceive some small amount by the addition or subtraction of which another becomes larger or smaller. This forms the instrument of ascertainment. Where one thing taken separately is of sufficient importance to form this instrument, it is taken. Thus, for ascertaining and knowing different amounts of men, one individual is of sufficient importance. Amounts of men are considered as increased or diminished by the addition or subtraction of individuals. 1

This social atomism was the directing hypothesis of Utilitarianism. The individual, not society, was the elemental fact, and as such was the proper unit of measurement in social science. Bentham insisted that all biological metaphors and analogies be excluded from the social sciences, and that figurative expressions like 'body politic' and 'public interest' be avoided. "An analogy founded solely on this metaphor has" Bentham declared, "furnished a foundation for pretend arguments and poetry has invaded the domain of reason." 2 "The community is a fictitious body," Bentham insisted, "composed of the individual persons who are considered as constituting as it were its members. The interest of the community then is what?--the sum of the interests of the several members who compose it." 3

This individualism informed the Utilitarians' thinking and led them to conclude that social interaction could be adequately explained in terms of individual needs and desires. Thus the Utilitarians postulated certain fundamental and permanent properties of man's being which

<sup>1</sup> J. Mill, Analysis, quoted in Halevy, Op. Cit., p. 502

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Halevy, Op.Cit., p.500

<sup>3</sup> J. Bentham, An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation (N.Y., 1948), p. 3

governed his pattern of actions and behaviour. Bentham saw the disposition to maximise pleasure and to minimize pain as one of the defining characteristics of man.

Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters pain and pleasure. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as determine what we shall do. On the one hand the standard of right and wrong, on the other the chain of causes and effects, are fastened to their throne. They govern us in all we do, in all we say, in all we think; every effort we can make to throw off our subjection, will serve but to demonstrate and confirm it. In words a man may pretend to abjure their empire but in reality he will remain subject to it all the while. The principle of utility recognises this subjection, and assumes it for the foundation of that system, the object of which is to rear the fabric of felicity by the hands of reason and of law. Systems which attempt to question it, deal in sounds instead of senses, in caprice instead of reason, in darkness instead of light. 1

The principle of utility was later supplemented by the greatest happiness or greatest felicity principle, i.e. the principle "which states the greatest happiness of all those whose interest is in question, as being the right and proper, and only right and proper universally desirable end of human action."<sup>2</sup> For Bentham man was so made that he would seek to maximise his own happiness. Happiness was the sum of pleasures and the principle of the greatest happiness an injunction for man to maximise his pleasure.

The principle of the 'greatest happiness', however, was not sufficient as a guide to politics and was accompanied by another principle, almost as predominant in the arguments of Bentham and James Mill as the 'greatest happiness' principle, asserting that all men were essentially and naturally egoistic. According to this principle of self-preference every individual would choose the form of action which he believed at that moment to be productive of greatest happiness.

<sup>1</sup> J. Bentham, An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation, p.1

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. n. 1.

Just as Bentham had assumed that all individuals were under the sovereign masters of pleasure and pain, and that they would seek to increase their own happiness, so too he assumed that any individual's capacity for happiness could be reckoned to be the same as any others. One individual's happiness was in itself as desirable an end as any other individual's. Differences between individuals were irrelevant to the legislators' purpose of promoting the greatest happiness of the greatest number.

Bentham also believed that the pleasures and pains that governed human nature were susceptible to measurement. In his celebrated felicific calculus Bentham attempted a quantitative comparison of pleasures and pains. Whilst Bentham conceded that in practice it was difficult to make accurate calculations, he believed that in principle it was possible to do so and that this should be kept 'in view' as a guide to policy. He wrote:

It is not to be expected that this process should be strictly pursued previously to every moral judgement, or to every legislative and judicial operation. It may, however, be always kept in view; and as near as the process actually pursued on these occasions approaches to it, so near will such a process approach to the character of an exact one. 1

For Bentham the 'greatest happiness' principle was the "only right and proper and universally desirable end of human action...and in particular, in that of a functionary or set of functionaries exercising the powers of government." <sup>2</sup> It was the "business of government to promote the happiness of society by rewarding and punishing." <sup>3</sup> Thus the 'greatest

<sup>1</sup> J. Bentham, The Principles of Morals and Legislation, p. 31.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 70.



happiness' principle proposed not only a guide but also an end for the activity of the legislator. According to the principle of utility the expediency of any act of government must be judged by its consequences; and it provided a clear criterion for legislative decisions. Bentham considered himself primarily a moralist and a legislator, and it was as a criterion in legislation that the greatest happiness principle acquired for him paramount importance.

Bentham's preoccupation was with the theoretical and practical reform of law. His purpose was twofold. Firstly, to provide a framework of theory for a legal system and secondly, to criticise the existing legal system in the light of that theoretical framework. The principle of utility provided both the cornerstone of the theory and the criterion on which to base the practical reform law. Benthamite Utilitarianism was essentially legalistic in that the principle of utility was primarily brought to bear on the whole system of law. L. Stephens has observed that,

However imperfect his system might be, considered as a science of society and human nature...(his) method involved a thorough-going examination of the whole body of laws, and a resolution to apply a searching test to every law. If that test was not so unequivocal or ultimate as he fancied, it yet implied the constant application of such considerations as must always carry weight, and perhaps, be always the dominant considerations, with the actual legislator or jurist. <sup>1</sup>

Both the Utilitarians and the Fabians, as practical reformers, sought to develop a science of society out of contemporary developments in the natural sciences. The Utilitarians grounded their theory in the Newtonian mechanistic model, upon which was based what E.J. Hobsbawm has vividly characterized as a bourgeois "accountancy of humanity." <sup>2</sup> The Fabians applied and exploited for the understanding of society an

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<sup>1</sup> L. Stephens, The English Utilitarians (London, 1900). Vol.1, p.271

<sup>2</sup> E.J. Hobsbawm, Industry and Empire (London, 1968), p. 61



evolutionary organic model. Whilst both groups were preoccupied with the idea of creating a social science which could re-order and guide mankind in political decision taking, the different conceptions of society which grew out of the different models employed are important to the understanding of the Fabian Utilitarian connection.

For the Fabians the social organism was not simply a polemical metaphor, but was a concept which defined particular features of human society and its constituent social institutions. "Society," was, Sidney Webb said, "one organism (that) grows, decays, separate parts grow or decay, new organs or parts arise. All according to natural law." "The study of this" Webb insisted was the "ultimate science."<sup>1</sup> Beatrice also saw the organic nature of society as its defining feature; and regarded the elemental unit of social science not as the individual but "persons, ~~past~~ and present; as groups bound up for a time in one form."<sup>2</sup> Other Fabians similarly emphasised the importance of the organic conception of society. Annie Besant maintained that society was not a "bag of marbles" but rather "individual human units...integrated into a social organism."<sup>3</sup> The Socialist conception of society, she argued was "the biological view of society, where they regarded it not as a mass of isolated atoms but as an organic whole, a growth with a common life running through it."<sup>4</sup> Shaw took issue with those who saw society as a loose aggregate of individual agents, each free to pursue their own desires. Modern society, Shaw insisted, was characterized by "minute division of labour... with the consequent interdependence of individuals forming it."<sup>5</sup> F. Podmore, in an article "Primitive Socialism" was at pains to point out the parallel between living organisms and human societies,<sup>6</sup> and

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<sup>1</sup> S. Webb, "The Economic History of Society in England."

<sup>2</sup> B. Webb, Diaries, June 3, 1883, PP. (my emphasis)

<sup>3</sup> A. Besant, The Evolution of Society, p. 3

<sup>4</sup> A. Besant, "Socialism V. Individualism," A Debate with F. Millar (Nottingham, 1890), p. 11.

<sup>5</sup> G.B. Shaw, "Freedom and the State," in Crompton, Op.Cit., p. 38

<sup>6</sup> F. Podmore, "Primitive Socialism," To-Day, Vol. 7, March 1887

D.G. Ritchie argued the importance of recognizing that "human societies, like natural organisms, grow and are not made."<sup>1</sup> Lesser known Fabians like W.H. Utley and the Reverend J. Wood,<sup>2</sup> also took organic unity as a defining characteristic of society. Thus an evolutionary social organicism was the directing hypothesis of Fabianism, as social atomism had been for the Utilitarians.<sup>3</sup>

Webb insisted that the new theories of the social organism and of evolution had fundamentally revolutionized thinking about the nature of man, and had established a wholly new approach to the study of society. The Utilitarians, he argued had not had the benefit of the new scientific thought and had proceeded on false premises.<sup>4</sup> The new discoveries in science had proved that the Utilitarian theory of man and society based on an atomic model, was not merely inadequate as a political philosophy but was wrong in its assumptions about the defining features of man and human society.

In an untitled paper written around 1900 Webb clearly outlined what he considered to be the Utilitarian mistake.

It gradually became evident that the old Philosophic Radicalism was not merely insufficient as a philosophy of society, but that it proceeded upon an entirely false assumption as its basis. Society is not a loose aggregate of individual human atoms, without existence distinguishable from that of the several items. An army is something more than the sum of its constituent

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<sup>1</sup> D.G. Ritchie, Darwinism and Politics, p. 68

<sup>2</sup> W.H. Utley, "Scientific Aspects of Socialism," Our Corner, Feb., 1, 1887; J. Wood, "Municipal Socialism," Fabian News, Dec. 1891

<sup>3</sup> The evolutionary organic view, which stressed the unconscious external and impersonal forces which effected social adaptation, represented a more sophisticated and plausible view than the atomistic model with its simple emphasis that social phenomena were explicable in terms of individual desires and purposes.

<sup>4</sup> cf. G.B. Shaw's address to the British Association for the Advancement of Science in which he argued "Bentham's was not the school in which men learned to solve problems to which history alone could give the key, or to form conceptions which belonged to the evolutionary order." "The Transition to Social Democracy," reprinted in Essays in the Economics of Socialism and Capitalism, ed. R.L. Smyth (London, 1964), p.46

elements, and a human society more than the individuals who compose it. The application of scientific method to sociology resulted in the discovery of the Social Organism, a conception utterly unknown to the Utilitarian Economists of the beginning of the century. Bentham indeed expressly denied its existence. Their view of the State was entirely atomistic or individualistic. To them a nation was a mere aggregate of individuals, a mere crowd. To them the man was all in all, the society nothing. Each man could serve himself better than another was likely to do--consequently all men could be best served by their own exertions---and this seemed to them identical with saying the Community would be best served in that way. Of the Community as a social organism, having a life or development apart from that of any individual in it, they had no conception. They fell even below the Greeks in their ignorance of what society was, for foreign as was the idea of development to Plato, he did at least recognize the statical side of the truth. The correction of this truth we owe, in the main to Auguste Comte, and in England, 'specially to Mill and Herbert Spencer. We are now able to realise the individual as a product of the social organism of which he forms an insignificant part, living, it is true, a conscious life, but a life forming part of the larger life-history of his community, with often diverging ends--the individual man, like the single organ of the human body strives to increase and develop in an individual way, but if the whole organism, whether social or biological is to be kept alive and in health this infinitesimal development must be rigidly subordinated to the welfare of the whole. 1

The revolution in opinion which the Fabians saw as distinguishing them from the Utilitarians stressed the unitary character of society and the mutual interrelationship of its constituent parts. When applied to society the evolutionary organic viewpoint stressed the claims of society against the untrammelled freedom of the individual.

The concept of the social organism had, Webb maintained, shifted the emphasis from the individual to society.

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<sup>1</sup> S. Webb, Untitled Paper, pp. VI, 64



Slowly sinking into men's minds all this while was the conception of a new social nexus, and a new end of social life. It was discovered (or rediscovered) that a society is something more than an aggregate of so many individual units--that it possesses existence distinguishable from those of any of its components. A perfect city became recognized as something to be tried by other tests, and weighted in other balances than the individual man. The community must necessarily aim, consciously or not, at its continuance as a community: its life transcends that of any of its members; and the interest of the individual unit must often clash with those of the whole. 1

As Webb saw it "the Social Organism was paramount over and prior to the individuals of each generation."<sup>2</sup> Thus terms such as 'public interest' and 'community', which were rejected by Bentham<sup>2</sup> were central to Fabian political philosophy. For the Fabians the interest of the community was paramount over the interests of the individual, and this stress on community interest derived from their organic view of society.

The Utilitarians' persistence in grounding social analysis in individual interests had, the Fabians maintained, led them into innumerable errors. Principal amongst these errors was the notion that social order was a static condition which could result from the free play of men's self-interested activities.

<sup>1</sup> S. Webb, "Historic," p. 56.

<sup>2</sup> Bentham had maintained that "The public interest is only an abstract term: it represents only the mass of individuals." The Principles of Morals and Legislation, p. 35. It was "vain to talk of the interest of the community, without understanding what is the interest of the individual. A thing is said to promote the interest, or to be for the interest, of an individual, when it tends to add to the sum total of his pleasures; or, what comes to the same thing, to diminish the sum total of his pains." Ibid.



Webb summed up the Utilitarian principles of felicity, self-preference and self-interest thus:

The only end of human endeavour is the maximizing of happiness, and the minimizing of unavoidable pain. At any given time, place and circumstance there must theoretically be one particular arrangement of all the elements of existence, human beings, commodities, social relations, which would result in a maximum of happiness and a minimum of pain; and there can conceivably be only one such arrangement. Accordingly every other arrangement is wrong, and productive of unnecessary unhappiness. But every known attempt to regulate or alter the unrestrained action of individuals seeking their full development in their own way, can be shown to have been attended with enormous evils. Hence the perfect arrangements--or at any rate the nearest possible approximation to it, is complete individual liberty. 1

This position Webb declared was "simply philosophical anarchism." 2

The primary objection of the Fabians to the Utilitarian idea that the harnessing of self-interest would achieve the greatest happiness of the greatest number, was to the implicit assumption that there were actions which could be identified as self-regarding. The principle of utility and of self-preference required not only that the individual exercise judicious foresight in his own affairs but also that the individual avoid interfering with other individuals' search for happiness. This idea that there were self-regarding actions--that it was possible for individuals to pursue their own happiness

<sup>1</sup> S. Webb, Untitled paper.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

independently of other individuals--was rejected by the Fabians. Webb maintained that "there are no purely self-regarding acts. Every act...is... a matter of social concern."<sup>1</sup> Shaw insisted that since no actions were self-regarding all men must limit their actions so as not to injure the community. "Conscientious educated men seek (to do that)...throughout their lives, and never for a moment think of themselves as free agents."<sup>2</sup>

The Fabians maintained that it was impossible to achieve the common benefit by allowing the individual to pursue his own self-interest. Actions of individuals were not self-regarding, but affected the whole of the community. The Utilitarians had taken a mechanistic model of society in which individual social atoms acted independently. They had failed to understand the organic nature of society, and in so doing had failed to see the importance of the welfare of the community as an end to be sought separately from the welfare of the individuals composing it. The new scientific conception of the social organism, had Webb declared, "put completely out of countenance the cherished principles of the Political Economist and the Philosophic Radical. We left them sailing into Anarchy on the stream of laissez-faire."<sup>3</sup>

Utilitarianism, the Fabians argued, had been an insufficient philosophy of society not only because it proceeded upon wrong-headed assumptions about the nature of society but also because it had a false conception of science. "Science," wrote Beatrice Webb, "and scientific method can be applied, not to the discovery of a

<sup>1</sup> S. Webb, "Considerations on Anarchism."

<sup>2</sup> G.B. Shaw, "Freedom and the State," in Crompton, Op.Cit., pp.38-39

<sup>3</sup> S. Webb, "Historic," p. 58.

right end, but to a discovery of a right way of getting to any particular ends." "The Benthamites," she continued, "fell lamentably short in their understanding of the scientific method." <sup>1</sup>

The great error of the Utilitarians had been their assumption that social interaction and social arrangements could be explained in terms of men's wants and desires. They had been concerned not with discovering sociological laws, but with determining the laws that govern human nature. As Beatrice Webb noted, "They deduced their ways of arriving at their own particular end--human happiness--from certain elementary observations of human nature."<sup>2</sup> The Utilitarians' mechanical model with its component individuals who were governed by unchanging principles of human nature was, the Fabians insisted, unsatisfactory either for understanding society or as a basis for making social and political recommendations.

Utilitarian science was mechanistic and static; Fabian science, organic and dynamic. Webb saw this difference as crucial to modern social thought and theory. In Fabian Essays he noted the change:

The ideal society was represented as in perfectly balanced equilibrium, without need or possibility of future organic alteration. Since their day we have learned that social reconstruction must not be gone at in this fashion. Owing mainly to the efforts of Comte, Darwin and Herbert Spencer, we can no longer think of the ideal society as an unchanging State. The social ideal from being static has become dynamic. <sup>3</sup>

Herbert Spencer had clearly differentiated between social statics and

<sup>1</sup> B. Webb, Our Partnership, p. 211

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> S. Webb, "Historic," p. 31



social dynamics. Social statics, Spencer maintained, concerned itself with "the equilibrium of the perfect society." "It seeks to determine what laws we must obey for the obtainment of complete happiness." Social dynamics on the other hand was the study of "the force by which society is advanced toward perfection."<sup>1</sup> In other words, social dynamics studied the influences which gradually disposed human beings to obey laws conditioning their own happiness.

The Utilitarian science of society had been a static one. The 'greatest happiness' principle set out the conditions of equilibrium in a perfect society and the conditions for the obtainment of complete happiness. Using the principle of utility, the Utilitarians sought to establish a clear, definite, and unchanging guide to law and politics. This, Webb maintained, was an "illjudged attempt to set up a series of natural laws, unbreakable and uncontrollable."<sup>2</sup> It was "the inevitable result of want of historical training and any hint of evolution."<sup>3</sup>

The Fabians argued that society was constantly changing, developing, progressing. Any science of society must therefore be dynamic; it must investigate the laws that governed social growth and change. The Fabians believed that these laws were ultimately discoverable. "Every day we know more of nature's uniformities, more as to the effects of conduct...Every day therefore...we diminish the sphere of chance, and we increase proportionately the area of conduct in which we have an opinion as to the right course."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> H. Spencer, Social Statics, p. 447

<sup>2</sup> S. Webb, Untitled paper.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> S. Webb, "Considerations on Anarchism."



Webb, in his untitled paper on the Utilitarians, outlined the difference between static and dynamic social theory:

we must remember that there is indubitably at any one moment one arrangement of men and things and social relations which involves the minimum of human misery then possible. To discover that arrangement for our own time is the statical problem of sociology. To discover how that arrangement is changing is the problem of dynamical sociology. <sup>1</sup>

This difference between the Utilitarian concept of science and the Fabian conception, which Webb, adopting Spencerian categories, had called static and dynamic, may be put another way. The Utilitarians conceived of science as an end; the Fabians as a means. The Utilitarians believed that science had given them certain definite and precise laws by which to judge and guide human action. The Fabians saw science as a method by which the laws of social action could be discovered.

Thus the Fabians insisted that it was impossible to understand the conditions of social welfare without understanding the laws of growth and equilibrium in society. It was impossible to arrive at an understanding of those conditions by inspecting the needs or desires of individuals. Society must be seen as a complex organism regulated and developed by discoverable processes and laws. There could be no improvement in social arrangements that did not harmonize with what Spencer had described as 'social statics and dynamics', and this knowledge could be had only by studying the evolving needs of the social organism.

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<sup>1</sup> S. Webb, Untitled paper.

The clearest distinction between the mechanical model of the Utilitarians and the evolutionary organic model of the Fabians was that the former regarded society as an artefact whereas the latter regarded society as the product of growth. The implication of organicism was that it focused attention on social change. Thus the Fabians insisted that it was impossible to make valid statements in the social sciences which were based on laws that purported to govern the behaviour of human beings as individuals. Explanations in the social sciences must, they insisted, refer to social laws and processes governing social development. The core of the difference between the two rival conceptions of society was, the Fabians argued, the emphasis which organicism placed on "the constant flux of things."

Thus, it is the constant flux of things which underlies all the 'difficulties' of Individualism. Whatever we may think of the existing social order, one thing is certain--namely, that it will undergo modification in the future as certainly and steadily as in the past. Those modifications will be partly the result of forces not consciously initiated or directed by human will. Partly, however, the modifications will be the results, either intended or unintended, of deliberate attempts to readjust the social environment to suit man's real or fancied needs. It is therefore not a question of whether the existing social order shall be changed, but of how this inevitable change shall be made. 1

The Fabians combined two propositions which served as both methodological guide and political exhortation. Firstly, society could not be adequately understood if it was seen as the result of individual desires and purposes. For the individual was part of an organic growth and was shaped by the forces of social development. Secondly, individuals should if necessary be subordinated to the

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<sup>1</sup> S. Webb, "The Difficulties of Individualism," Fabian Tract No.69., p.4.

needs of society, since the individual did not have an independent existence but was part of the tissue of the social organism.

For Beatrice Webb this view often took the form of a social pathology. Her discussion of social problems tended to be in terms of diseases which required proper diagnosis.<sup>1</sup> As far as individual happiness was concerned, Beatrice thought that individuals might be as mistaken about that as about their own medical symptoms. She stated quite clearly that in social analysis it was not the immediate individual wants and desires that must be taken into account, but the long term requirements of society. Joseph Chamberlain had once argued that governments should give the people what they wanted. Beatrice questioned the wisdom of this and asked if it might not be wrong for governments "to gratify the sensations of the great social organism," and whether it should not impose right remedies "irrespective of the longings of the patient. If the government is an outside force to be directed by the ablest minds...then it is a question of correct diagnosis and a most deeply thought out treatment." <sup>2</sup>

Sidney Webb, while less inclined to use the language of social pathology, was no less insistent than Beatrice that it was

<sup>1</sup> See H. Spencer's criticism of Beatrice's earliest writing "The Rise and Growth of English Economics." Letter from H. Spencer to B. Potter, Oct. 2, 1886, PP. Spencer warned Beatrice against studying pathological states. However, Beatrice's institutional studies continued to take the form of social pathology and as late as the 1930's Beatrice spoke in terms of the diseases of society. Cf. "Diseases of the Capitalist System," BBC talk, Jan., 21, 1932, PP VI 83; "Diseases of Organized Society," The Listener, Jan., 20, 1953, PP VI, 34.

<sup>2</sup> B. Webb, Diaries, Sept. 26, 1883, PP.



often necessary to disregard questions of individual welfares and look to the fundamental laws governing the continuance and health of society. "The interest of the individual must often clash with those of the whole" <sup>1</sup> but because the continued health and existence of the social organism was the paramount end, individual interests must be subordinated to the whole. Consequently, the conditions of social health must be a matter of scientific investigation.

Modern Socialism, the Fabians insisted, was:

a rapidly-spreading conviction, as yet only partly conscious of itself, that social health and consequently human happiness is something apart from and above the separate interest of individuals, requiring to be consciously pursued as an end in itself; that the lesson of evolution and social development is the substitution of consciously regulated co-ordination among the units of each organism for their internecine competition. <sup>2</sup>

The concept of society as an organic growth had provided insight into the natural and proper dispensation of man and society. The individual really existed only in and through society.

The individual is now created by the social organism of which he forms a part; his life is born of the larger life, his attributes are moulded by the social pressure; his activities inextricably interwoven with others belong to the activity of the whole. Without the continuance and sound health of the social organism, no man can live or thrive; and its <sup>3</sup> presistence is accordingly his paramount end.

<sup>1</sup> S. Webb, "Historic," p. 56.

<sup>2</sup> S. Webb, "The Difficulties of Individualism," Fabian Tract No.41., p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> S. Webb, "Historic," p. 57



During the closing decades of the nineteenth century the social health of the social organism could not, as hitherto, be automatically assumed for the emergence of successful groups of industrial and economic competitors indicated the end of the age of certain expansion.

Whilst the 'Great Depression' was not heralded by the type of catastrophic decline in working class living standards which accompanied former and subsequent depressions, and whilst there was no dramatic ruin of major industries, the competitive advance of industrialization in economies such as the U.S.A., Germany and Japan evoked in the middle-class a "pervasive--and for the generations since 1850 a new--state of mind of uneasiness and gloom about the prospects of the British economy."<sup>1</sup> The increasing Fabian concern with national survival was part of this middle class reaction to the failure of the British economy to regain its former dynamism in the face of the increasingly successful competitive challenge of other rapidly industrializing economies, whose industrial performance came to outstrip that of Great Britain in many areas. The Fabians saw in these dark clouds which hung over the British economy in the closing decades of the nineteenth century a storm which laissez-faire individualism could not ride out. As other nations, and particularly the U.S.A. and Germany industrialised, the Fabians saw that the laissez-faire individualism of British capitalism did not equip it for the international competitors' struggle for

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E.J. Hobsbawm, Industry and Empire, p. 104

national survival.<sup>1</sup> This concern with national efficiency in the late 1880's and early 1890's foreshadowed their later association with the Liberal Imperialists.

For Webb, the depression of the 1880's and Britain's economic decline relative to other nations, had made the necessity of subordinating individuals to society into a categorical imperative. Webb, watched, with anxiety the international challenge to British industries, and concluded that the lesson of evolution was "that interracial competition was more momentous in its consequences than the struggle between individuals."<sup>2</sup> The 'aim' of society was now its own continuance as a society. It was in competition with other societies in the continuing struggle for existence, for "competition between communities rather than between individuals in a community...is perhaps now becoming the main field of natural selection." Thus it was essential for society to develop those

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<sup>1</sup> Thus Clarke found in the growth of foreign trusts, combines rings, syndicates and large monopolies (which he followed Cleveland in characterizing as the 'communism of capital') an implied collapse of the industrial basis of laissez-faire individualism. Socialism was put forward as the democratic alternative to the growth of large scale capitalist combinations. See W. Clarke, "Industrial,"

(The argument that the competitive struggle for efficiency would result in capitalist monopolies was also put forward by Sydney Ball in "The Moral Aspects of Socialism," Fabian Tract No. 72). And Webb, in an intriguing modification of the Fabian theory of rent argued in 1889 that only through the extension of collective ownership could the 'ordinary labourer' come to have any interest in industrial improvements or efficiency. See "On the Relation Between Wages and the Remainder of the Economic Product."

<sup>2</sup> S. Webb, "The Difficulties of Individualism," Fabian Tract No. 69. p. 16.

characteristics which would make it successful in the struggle for survival. The most important attribute for survival was 'social organisation'. In the international struggle for the survival of the fittest:

we must take even more care to improve the social organism of which we form a part than to perfect our own individual developments. Or rather, the perfect and fitting development of each individual is not necessarily the utmost cultivation of his own personality, but the filling, in the best possible way, of his humble function in the great social machine." 1

The conditions of social health, as Webb saw them, were not the greatest happiness of the greatest number, but social organisation, progress, efficiency, planning---those things which would aid society in the struggle for national survival. 2

D.G. Ritchie had arrived at similar conclusions. In discussing the sphere of State activity, Ritchie suggested, that the Utilitarian question 'Will it tend to the greatest happiness of the greatest number?' be changed to the less misleading

1 S. Webb, "Historic," p. 58.

2 Webb in his belief in the need to strengthen England's national efficiency followed Huxley's lead in making a plea for expanded technical education. "...unless we see to the training of our residuum, France and Germany and the United States will take our place in the world's workshop." "The Difficulties of Individualism", p. 17. Also see "The London School Board Election." The Star, June 28, 1888. Factory legislation and measures for better health, sanitation and housing could also be justified as a means to make Britain more efficient in competing with its growing industrial rivals.



question of:

Will it tend to the greater well-being, physical intellectual, moral of mankind, or at least of that portion of mankind of which we can practically take into account? Or we may put it: 'Will it make society healthier?' 1

While this might have seemed to be a different rendering of the Utilitarian formula, Ritchie maintained that it was not. The confusion arose because "healthy activities are (on the whole, and in the long run) pleasant activities." Consequently, "the mistake has arisen of treating the accompanying pleasure as if it were the end to be sought." The "greater well-being, physical, intellectual, moral of mankind," was not an end to be sought because it led to the greatest happiness of the greatest number but because it led to national survival.

The doctrine of Natural Selection applied to society has given a new meaning to the Utilitarian theory, while correcting its errors and narrowness. If we can foresee what will tend towards the common welfare and adopt it, we shall save our society from going to ruin by external attack or internal dissolution. 2

As Ritchie saw, it, Utilitarian theory had been adapted to the age of evolutionary science, and had been given 'new force and new meaning.' By inspecting the needs of the social organism social scientists could supply new tests for social welfare in place of the narrow individualistic criteria suggested by the Utilitarians.

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<sup>1</sup> D.G. Ritchie, "The Principles of State Interference," p. 107.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., pp. 107-108



Despite Webb's and Ritchie's sometimes authoritarian rhetoric in emphasising the necessity of subordinating the needs of the individual to the community, neither they nor the other Fabians denied that the individual was important. Thus Webb insisted that:

The real aim of all social reformers, temperance, religious and political, salvationists and Socialists alike, must always be the formation of human character, the building and guiding of the individual will. The goal of all the future of London is nothing more nor less than the development of the character of the individual Londoner. 1

Yet the crucial point remained, that the individual will should be guided toward the public purpose. It was "the business of the community...to develop its social institutions (so) that individual egoism is necessarily directed so as to promote only the well-being of all."<sup>2</sup> Both society and the individual would improve and advance as a result of the individual's identification of himself with the social whole.

The interests of society were placed ahead of those of the individual because the individual's welfare, happiness and freedom ultimately rested in a sound and healthy society. Webb said that "it is the relative development of the Social Organism that shows the type: having got a good type of organism...and not until then, can the individual usefully advance."<sup>3</sup> Only a healthy society

<sup>1</sup> S. Webb, London, Oct., 12, 1893

<sup>2</sup> S. Webb, The Progress of Socialism, p. 12.

<sup>3</sup> S. Webb, "Rome: A Sermon in Sociology," p. 89

could create positive opportunities for individuals to develop their fullest potential and exercise their creative energies. Thus Olivier argued that only in a "healthy well nourished society" was it possible to attain the "greatest freedom of the greatest number."

The work done by Socialists for the promotion of their ideas is accordingly not done from what is called philanthropy, or self-renunciation, or duty, but simply from a desire to enlarge the conditions of freedom for themselves, which depends upon the freedom, material and intellectual, of other persons composing society. <sup>1</sup>

The concept of the social organism had ended the false distinction between society and the individual; between individual interests and social welfare. Individuals were coming to recognize that they possessed individuality only as part of society. The old individualism of the Utilitarians was being superceded by an acceptance of the organic interdependence of modern society in which the individual formed part of the social whole.

The Fabians regarded the individualism of the Utilitarians as a threat to the survival of the social organism; it would lead to the dissolution and destruction of society, and it was in this context that they referred to individualism as 'anarchism'. They were unalterably opposed to the atomistic conception of society and insisted that the end of endeavour and activity was the progress and survival of society rather than the maximization of individual happiness. That end they insisted was found not by a moral

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<sup>1</sup> S. Olivier, "Socialist Individualism," Fabian Autumn Lecture Series, Oct., 21, 1891, reported in Fabian News, Nov. 1891

arithmetic based on an individualistic premise but by studying the laws of social development.

The view that a philosophic community between the Fabians and the Utilitarians resided in the fact that the Fabians presented a new version of the greatest happiness of the greatest number in terms appropriate to the new age is therefore misleading.<sup>1</sup> It suggests that the Fabians accepted the Utilitarian proposition that the legitimate end of government was the promotion of the 'greatest happiness of the greatest number' and differed only in respect of the means to achieve that end. What distinguished the Fabians from the Utilitarians was not a question of State intervention as against laissez-faire, but whether the state intervened to supplement or supplant individualism.

The Fabians' objections to the Utilitarian analysis of society reflects the influence of Spencer, Comte and Mill. To Spencer they owed not only their evolutionary organic outlook but their method of ascertaining social aims.

Spencer had always considered himself a friendly critic of the Utilitarians, and his first book Social Statics had been intended

<sup>1</sup> G.D.H. Cole argued that the Fabians were Utilitarians in this sense: "They held, that, whereas in Bentham's day the main task might have been the removal of forms of State interference which prevented happiness, in their own day the supreme need was the enactment of new measures of State intervention in order to promote happiness. British Working Class Politics, pp. 122-123.

T. Nairn similarly concluded, "Fabian Socialism derived from Utilitarianism, the timid and dreary species of bourgeois rationalism embraced by the British middle-class during the Industrial Revolution. In it, bourgeois rationalism became socialist rationalism chiefly through the substitution of the state for the magic forces of the laissez-faire capitalist market: the former was seen as bringing about the 'greatest happiness of the greatest number' almost as automatically as the latter had been. "The Nature of the Labour Party," p. 165



as both critique and corrective of Utilitarian philosophy.<sup>1</sup> Spencer regarded the principle of utility as "no rule at all... but rather an enunciation of the problem to be solved." Furthermore, in matters of legislation and social policy, it was difficult to know what means to adopt to achieve the desired ends. The statue book was "a record of unhappy guesses."<sup>2</sup>

The basis of Spencer's critique of Utilitarianism was the theory of evolution which shattered the notion of a unitary human nature on which deductive Utilitarianism was founded. Because man's circumstances were constantly changing it was impossible for a clear moral and political guide to be inferred from practice. "If humanity is indefinitely variable, it cannot be used as a gauge for testing moral truth."<sup>3</sup>

Whilst Spencer believed that human actions were subject to laws, he also insisted that history as a whole was subject to a law of development. Consequently, sociological laws could only be derived by studying the process of evolution; and only such detailed and systematic study could supply evidence for social and political policy prescriptions.

Because Utilitarianism lacked an evolutionary sociology it looked at proximate causes of human behaviour and drew false conclusions in respect of legislation. In an article. "The Great Political

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<sup>1</sup> Spencer was broadly in sympathy with the social aims of the Utilitarians. In terms of his ultimate ethical standard he might be termed a utilitarian: "I conceive it to be the business of moral science to deduce, from the laws of life and the conditions of existence, what kinds of action necessarily tend to produce happiness, and what kinds to produce unhappiness." Autobiography, Vol II, p. 88.

<sup>2</sup> H. Spencer, Social Statics, p. 10

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 37



"Superstition." Spencer discussed the unsound and mistaken notion of utility which underlay the political practice of contemporary Liberalism. Utilitarianism as "commonly held" was Spencer declared, "not true."

Alike by the statement of utilitarian moralists, and by the acts of politicians, knowingly or unknowingly following their lead, it is implied that utility is to be directly determined by simple inspection of the immediate facts and estimation of probable results. 1

True utility, Spencer continued, was not 'empirically estimated' but 'rationally determined.'

the dictates of utility and consequently, the proper actions of governments, are not to be settled by inspection of facts on the surface, and acceptance of their prima facie meaning; but are to be settled by reference to, and deductions from fundamental facts. 2

The Fabians would not have agreed with Spencer as to the fundamental facts. After all Spencer was attacking the kind of legislation and social policy which the Fabians supported. What they would have agreed upon was the necessity of social health and the necessity of determining social health not by the Utilitarian calculus of adding quantities of individual welfares, but by reference to the needs of the social organism.

The Fabian's rejection of the central tenets of Utilitarianism was further encouraged by their study of Comte. Comte's evolutionary

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<sup>1</sup> H. Spencer, The Man Versus the State, p. 180

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 181

sociology and his insistence that human nature was historically conditioned highlighted the inadequacies of a science of society and politics based on deductions from a law of human nature. His insistence on the innate sociability of man, "in virtue of an instinctive tendency toward common life independently of all personal calculation and often contrary to the most energetic individual interests,"<sup>1</sup> helped to sustain the Fabians' social outlook against the old individualism of Utilitarianism. Thus Comte encouraged and reinforced the Fabian belief that a greater sense of cohesion, social solidarity and commitment would develop within society in response to the appeal to social duty.

J.S. Mill had also been important in influencing the Fabians' intellectual horizons by suggesting that the conclusions of his teachers had a limited validity. Inspired by continental philosophy Mill had reacted against the parochialism of his father and Bentham. The older Utilitarians, Mill believed, had made grave errors in laying down universal precepts. They had failed to distinguish between the laws of human behaviour and the application of those laws under the varying circumstances of time and place. It was due to this historical relativism that the Fabians came to regard Mill as the epitome of transition between Philosophical Radicalism and Socialism.

During the half century that separated the Fabians from the Utilitarians the limits of experience had widened, there had been a growing recognition of the necessity for historical perspective, and sociology had begun to develop as a distinct branch of knowledge. It is in the light of these changed circumstances and new ideas that the Fabians' rejection of Utilitarian theory must be seen.

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<sup>1</sup> A. Comte, Cours de Philosophie Positive (London, 1908), Vol. IV, p. 285, quoted in Greene, Op. Cit., p.425

Yet if the Fabians differed from the Utilitarians in looking at society and social institutions rather than individuals, in basing science on induction and verification rather than deduction, and in being concerned with social health rather than individual happiness, there remained a kinship. Both the Utilitarians and the Fabians accepted an ethical system which treated consequences rather than motives as the test of rightness. Both groups, as practical reformers were concerned with how their ideas affected human affairs. Both groups also saw themselves in possession of a scientific politics.

In this last respect the Fabians were not as creative nor original as the Utilitarians. Nor were the Fabians as a group able to resolve the tension between means and ends, between science and the affirmations of moral experience with the same degree of confidence as the Utilitarians.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, it remains true that the Fabians like the Utilitarians tended to think of politics in terms of applied scientific intelligence and consequently tended to indulge in a variety of elitism in the cult of the expert.

Perhaps it was the cult of the expert that cemented the Fabian Utilitarian association. Bentham influenced the Fabians because he spoke to them as disinterested professionals. If Bentham was the champion of the English shopkeeper, he was also the champion of expert, disinterested, efficient, uncorrupt government. As Bentham sought to abolish the amateurism and inefficiency of government dominated by aristocratic patronage, so the Fabians sought to supplant

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<sup>1</sup> S. Letwin in The Pursuit of Certainty in which she attempts to relate Beatrice Webb and the Utilitarians suggests that Beatrice and Sidney Webb effectively closed the gap between fact and value; that for the Webb's "politics would comprehend everything." p. 378. Whilst Beatrice on occasion spoke as if she had resolved the fact value distinction Miss Letwin overemphasises the assurance and consistency with which Beatrice accomplished this. Also see G. Himmelfarb, "The Intellectual in Politics: The case of the Webbs," Miss Himmelfarb points out that what so impressed the Webbs in the Soviet Union was the assimilation of judgements of value to those of fact within the collective ideal.



the anarchy and national inefficiency of the bourgeoisie. What the Fabians and Utilitarians esteemed was expert, professional administration; and it was as intellectuals who thought of themselves in administrative terms that the Fabian Utilitarian association lies.

It was as practical men that the Fabians and Utilitarians sought as intellectuals to intervene in politics. It was as administrators and commissioners that they sought to change laws and institutions.

At the heart of both Fabianism and Utilitarianism was a profound practicality.

Let us seek only for what is attainable; it presents a career sufficiently vast for genius; sufficiently difficult for the exercise of the greatest virtues. We shall never make this world the abode of perfect happiness; when we shall have accomplished all that can be done, this paradise will yet be, according to the Asiatic idea, only a garden; but this garden will be a most delightful abode, compared with the savage forest in which men have so long wandered. 1

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<sup>1</sup> J. Bentham, "The Influence of Time and Place in Matters of Legislation," Collected Works, Vol. I, p. 194



## GENERAL

If by the mid 1890's we are to see the Fabians as the 'New Utilitarians', they must be thus regarded only as the product of a 'long clarifying experience'. This clarifying experience had not taken the form of a rigorous philosophical inquiry, but rather the Fabians had taken up many ideas and discarded those which were not useful. Seen in this light it would be mistaken to view the Fabians as 'New Utilitarians' in the sense that they worked from basic premises to logical conclusions in the same way as Bentham and James Mill had done. The Fabians were not original thinkers but synthesizers. "I like" said Webb to Bertrand Russell, "to derive my conclusions from other men's premises."<sup>1</sup>

The Fabians had been quite promiscuous in their intellectual associations. As Olivier said, he was "anxious to investigate all forms of religion and thought and feeling."<sup>2</sup> They sampled most of the advanced thinkers of their day, borrowing and modifying, discarding and incorporating a variety of ideas.

The Fabians came to Socialism as middle class intellectuals and the 'long clarifying experience' was essentially a middle class experience which had been rooted in the new social and

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<sup>1</sup>Quoted by R. Harrison, in a review of W. Wolfe, From Radicalism to Socialism, Economic History Review. This review article was unpublished at the time of writing but the author kindly allowed me to read the proofs.

<sup>2</sup>Olivier to M. Cox, Feb. 7, 1884, M. Olivier, Op. Cit., p. 62.

economic uncertainties of the last quarter of the nineteenth century and found new hope in the certainties of science. The 'long clarifying experience' must also be seen in the light of the experience of a young, ambitious and rising intelligentsia which was consciously distinguishing itself as a contingent of the nouvelle couche sociale.

It has been a glaring neglect in previous accounts of Fabianism, including the most recent ones by W. Wolfe and S. Pierson, to underestimate the profound and pervasive influence of Herbert Spencer. Relying upon the obvious antagonism between Spencer's extreme laissez-faire individualism and socialism, historians have dismissed him as a formative influence on socialist thought. Yet in terms of the general framework of their ideas, the Fabian debt to Spencer was fundamental.

Spencer was one of the bridges between Radicalism and Socialism; the foundations of which were cemented in the radical politics of land nationalization and in evolutionary science. The Fabians had found in Spencer's Social Statics "irresistable arguments for land nationalization" and when he abridged these arguments from later editions of his book they "could not admit that the old Spencer had any right to do this violence to the young Spencer."<sup>1</sup>

However, Spencer's primary importance to the Fabians was as the leading exponent of evolutionary sociology. Spencer suggested the reality of evolution and triumphantly identified it with Progress. Socialists could learn this lesson without subscribing

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<sup>1</sup>G.B.Shaw, ed. Fabian Essays, preface to 1908 edition, p. xv.

to Spencer's notion of a single evolutionary law or to his political conclusions concerning the direction of evolution.

Thus Webb could declare with bouyant optimism that:

the tide of European Socialism is rolling in upon us like a flood. If we look back along the line of history, we see the irresistible sweep of the growing tendency: if we fly to biological science we do not escape the lesson: on all sides the sociologic evolution compels our adherence. 1

Contrary to what Lichtheim has said, it was not necessary for Spencer's former pupils to "adapt Comte before they could draw socialist conclusions from their dissatisfaction with liberalism."<sup>2</sup> The important road out of Spencer and into Socialism led through the alleged contradiction between the Philosopher's insistence upon the 'organic analogy' and his 'administrative nihilism'. Whilst that contradiction was by no means as flagrant as Socialists took it to be, they sought to separate Spencer's sociological thought from his political prescriptions by driving a wedge between his evolutionary organicism and his laissez-faire individualism. Thus whilst supplying Socialists with fruitful concepts, Spencer was no less useful as an object of ridicule, as a man who would not or could not see the logic of his own conclusions.

Nor, as recently suggested by W. Wolfe, was the Fabian commitment to the Spencerian framework supplanted by Comte.<sup>3</sup> Webb, even at the height of his infatuation with the Positivist method of social reconstruction, rested his arguments on Spencerian

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<sup>1</sup> S. Webb, The Progress of Socialism, p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> G. Lichtheim, A Short History of Socialism, p.175.

<sup>3</sup> W. Wolfe, From Radicalism to Socialism, p. 191. Wolfe makes this claim in respect of Webb.

notions of structural and functional adaptation rather than

Comte's law of the three stages.<sup>1</sup>

This is not to say that the Fabians were not impressed with Positivism. For a time they had found the idea of the 'moralization of the monopolist' a hopeful solution to the social evils of their day. They approved of Comte's notion of increasing altruism and the idea of the gradual ascendancy of man's social nature, and were prepared to supplement their later Socialism with some Positivist morality.

However, as a sociologist, it was Spencer, the precursor of modern functionalism, who was theoretically the most important. In adopting Spencer's evolutionary organic outlook, the Fabians also adopted the idea of the increasing mutual interdependence of structurally differentiated parts and the co-ordination of their specialized functions. It was this broadly functionalist framework that directed not only the Webbs' monumental institutional studies but also the Fabian approach to the task of social reform. The Fabians sought to achieve socialism through ongoing institutions by proposing structural and functional modifications within institutions so as to create more democratic and efficient organization.

If Spencer was of greater theoretical importance than Comte, the Fabians' association with Positivism was nevertheless important. In the broadest sense, in respecting science and the scientific method, the Fabians were positivists. Beatrice

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<sup>1</sup>See particularly the "Economic Function of the Middle Class", Webb saw the moralization of the capitalist as a functional adaptation that was necessary if the middle class was to survive.



Potter Webb owed a considerable debt to the Positivists for teaching her some of the techniques and methods of social science. She later employed these techniques along with Spencerian methods of institutional analysis when she formed that famous partnership with Sidney Webb.

In a political sense the Fabian experience with Positivism had been important in demonstrating the inadequacies of a programme of social reconstruction which relied on moral rather than political remedies. Confronted with the social and economic problems related to the depression, the limitations of Positivist social and economic theory became apparent. With the disruption in the Liberal Party and the creation of the London County Council the Fabians recognized new areas for political activity and turned away from Positivism to Socialism.

The Fabians' study of Marx was of considerable importance in the development of their Socialist ideas. Whilst they rejected Marxian methodology, they approved of his factual indictment of capitalism. However, Marx's fundamental contribution to Fabian thought was the idea of surplus value as the basis of capitalist exploitation.

John Stuart Mill, despite the Fabians' admiration, was not of major theoretical importance. Mill's economic theories as W. Wolfe correctly points out "were never very favourable to socialistic schemes."<sup>1</sup> Moreover, in organizational terms, Mill's view of socialism as the practice of association stood in marked contrast to Fabian collectivism. The Fabians were not unaware of the theoretical discontinuities between Mill's thought and their own,

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<sup>1</sup>W. Wolfe, From Radicalism to Socialism,

and their claim that he was a bridge between Radicalism and Socialism must be seen in the light of political expediency. Being impressed with Mill they took his professions of socialism at more than their face value and for opportunistic reasons pushed them to their outer limits. The Fabians knew Mill to be a popular figure among Radicals and exploited this popularity in driving home a socialist message. Whilst their opportunism at times went beyond the limits intellectual integrity might have set, they tended to emphasise the trend of Mill's thought, arguing that a steady development toward socialism was clearly discernible not only in the successive editions of the Principles but in his thinking on the land question.

Yet their opportunism was leavened by a genuine regard for Mill, who in many respects personified the Fabian ideal of the disinterested and dedicated professional. In this respect, as R. Harrison has suggested, Mill perhaps "mattered to the Fabians as one associated with what they supposed to be an efficacious and pioneering excursion by organized intellectuals in politics."<sup>1</sup>

It is as intellectuals in politics that the Fabians most clearly emerge as the 'New Utilitarians'. Lying along a continuum with the Utilitarians and the Positivists, the Fabians represented the most advanced phase in the emergence of intellectuals as a distinct social formation in the nineteenth century.

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<sup>1</sup>R. Harrison, Review of W. Wolfe, From Radicalism to Socialism.

The Fabian Utilitarian association lies in the fact that as intellectuals they were, as they never wearied of telling the world, practical men who saw themselves in administrative terms and sought to make their social theory into an applied science.

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